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An Unsung Hero
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Bush's Best Move Yet
THE EDITORS

FEBRUARY 26, 2001

Leap of Faith

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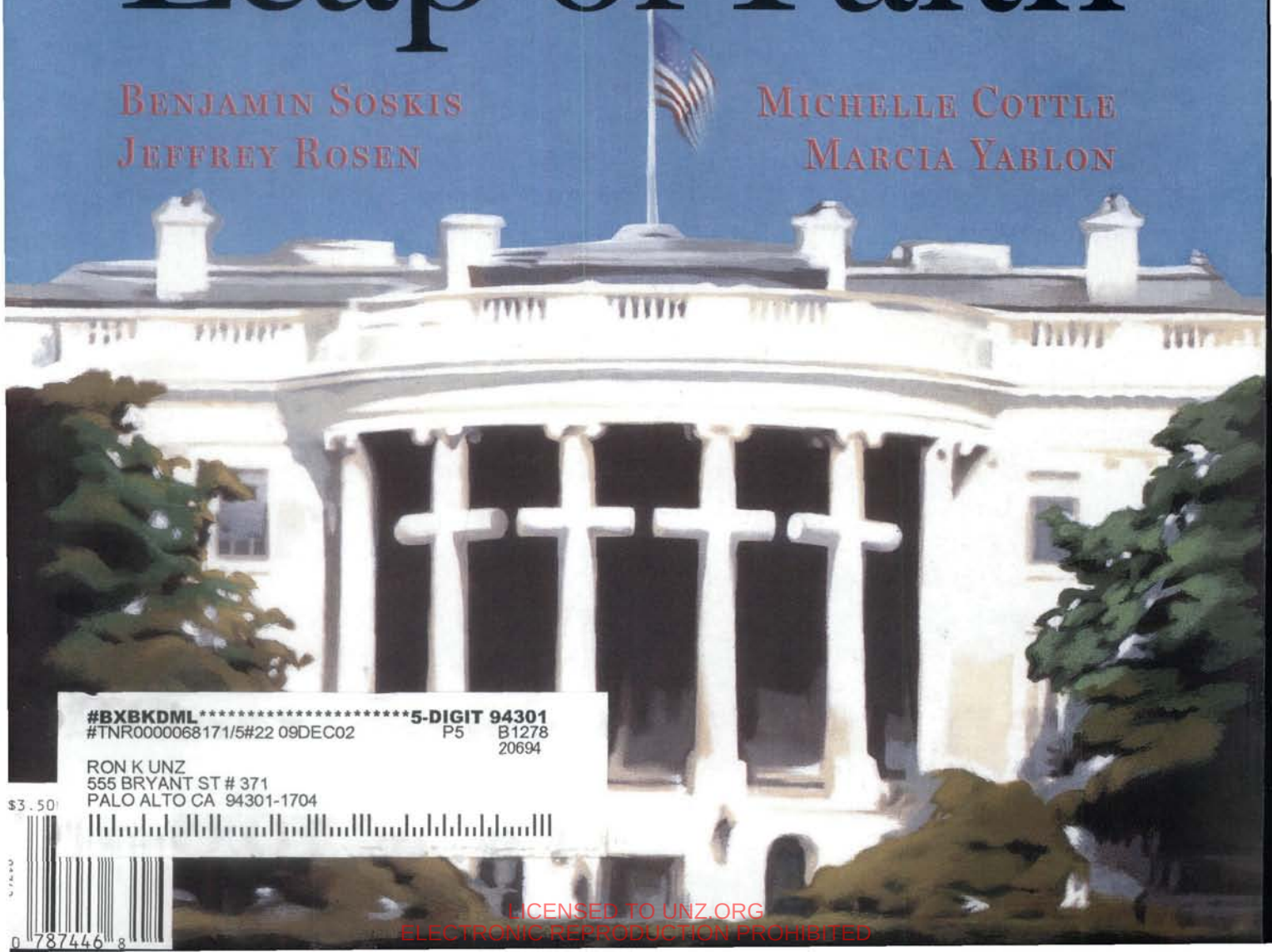

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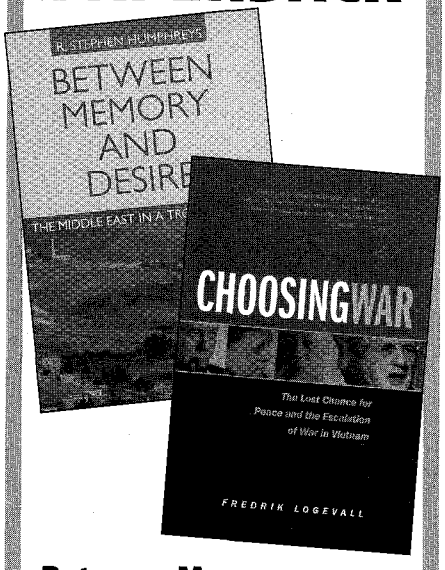
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Limited government

TO THE EDITORS:

Jonathan Chait makes several good points about President Clinton's economic policy, but he still does not manage to rebut the major rival thesis about the economy of the last eight years: that Clinton did well by doing little, by letting Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan manage monetary policy, and, ironically, because his failed health care program and the defeat of his stimulus package helped the Republicans take Congress ("Formula Won," January 22). The Republican Congress forced Clinton away from his spending side (which a Democratic Congress would have indulged), and he kept in check the Republicans' desire for tax cuts. Hence the only alternative was for Clinton to call for a balanced budget, and for Republicans (who had long called for a balanced-budget amendment) to agree to it. Did economic growth accelerate when the Republicans took Congress? Did interest rates change? What did the bond market do, and when did it do it? Chait does not answer any of these questions.

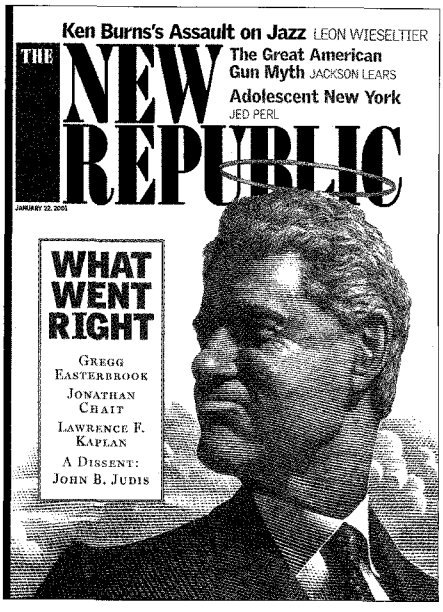
In short, Chait makes many assertions about the impact of Clinton's policies on the economy but does not prove them. He argues at a level too vague to prove correlation.

RICHARD SAMUELSON
Glasgow, Scotland

Russia with love

TO THE EDITORS:

In an effort to credit President Clinton with success in Kosovo, Lawrence F. Kaplan overlooks some crucial points ("Air Time," January 22). The problem starts when Kaplan mentions that Clinton's success had to do more with domestic politics than strategy. Pairing the two concepts can actually hurt strategic thinking, hindering a state's flexibility to conduct war. The American people hold disdain for massive casualties if the mission is not clear. In Kosovo, the stated goal of the mission—to diminish the Serbs' military capabilities—differed from the means used. By bombing from 15,000 feet and publicly taking the option of ground troops off the table, NATO could not stop the eviction of Kosovar Albanians from their homes. Bombing cigarette factories took the onus off knocking out small units involved in the expulsions. In fact, the most mistaken conclusion one can make about the Kosovo offensive is that airpower won the war by itself. That ignores the complicated diplomatic maneuvering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taking place in NATO capitals, Belgrade, and Moscow. Indeed, the lasting image of Kosovo may be not jets streaking across the sky but Russian troops dashing for Pristina.

LORENZO R. CORTES
Alexandria, Virginia

Downsized

TO THE EDITORS:

Gregg Easterbrook notes that the 300,000 positions cut from the federal payroll from 1993 to today were primarily in the more highly paid upper management ("Modest Gain," January 22). In my six years' experience with the federal government during this period, I saw virtually none of the top jobs eliminated; instead, these positions were immediately replaced, often treated like heirlooms to be passed on as rewards to other fast-trackers.

There was a good bit of downsizing, but it was all at the "worker bee" level. Computer workers, other technical employees, and even secretaries were seldom replaced when they left. These were also the jobs that were targeted for "outsourcing," a maneuver that was supposed to save money but was discovered to be much more costly. "Reinvention" has created a federal workforce with plenty of high-priced chiefs who have no need or desire to retire and a temp workforce, which is considered "off the rolls," at the lower service level.

JACK HEATH
Bellmawr, New Jersey

Pride and prejudice

TO THE EDITORS:

Speaking in favor of John Ashcroft's nomination to be attorney general, Andrew

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Sullivan writes, "I'm not sure what the definition of bigotry is" ("Lock in the Cabinet," January 22). A bigot is "a person obstinately or intolerantly devoted to his or her own opinions and prejudices" (Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition). Ashcroft certainly revealed himself to be a bigot on the issue of James Hormel's appointment as ambassador to Luxembourg, even though Sullivan equivocates on the matter. It should be clear that known bigots should not be confirmed to office—especially to a high law enforcement office. We may also dwell upon Ashcroft's association with the anti-Catholic Bob Jones University, his gross misrepresentations of Judge Ronnie White's record, and his warm feelings for the remnants of the Confederacy. There is no reason to oppose Ashcroft on account of his religion—to do so would be bigoted. He should be opposed on his record.

MARK RICE
Alexandria, Virginia

Food fights

TO THE EDITORS:
The kindest word that could be used to describe Eli Kintisch's "Sticker Shock" is "disingenuous" (January 22). Kintisch says genetically modified (GM) foods have "caused no known health problems at all." That's just the point: GM-related problems are as yet unknown. If, as Kintisch says, food manufacturers "have no idea how much GM food—if any—their products contain," one has to ask, why not?

The claims that labeling will add extra costs and bureaucratic burdens are old and tired; they have been trotted out every time industry has felt the need to impose its will on a resistant public. And make no mistake about it: The public will resist. That it hasn't previously is due to the fact that, until recently, it was largely unaware of the presence of GM material in food. Food manufacturers and retailers are about to relearn a basic tenet of business: The customer is always right.

LARRY SWARTZ
Lancaster, Kentucky

TO THE EDITORS:
Eli Kintisch's excellent article on the complexities associated with labeling GM food would perhaps have had greater poignancy had he informed his readers that virtually all the food we eat today is genetically modified. For centuries, farmers and shepherds used selective breeding to create a large number of plants and animals having a variety of properties, many of which pertained to their use as food. The modern use of biotechnology is as a means whereby genes can be transferred relatively precisely from one organism to another, with greater predictability of results, compared with slower and less predictable breeding methods. GM food is nothing more than an efficient, cost-effective means of developing food with special properties—better taste, more nutritional value, faster growth, more environmental hardiness, better looks, or a longer shelf life. Why should one form of genetically engineered food be treated differently from any other? It shouldn't.

SHELDON F. GOTTLIEB, PH.D.
Boynton Beach, Florida

TO THE EDITORS:
Eli Kintisch correctly reaffirms the safety and equivalence of foods containing components derived from genetically enhanced ingredients. However, the implication that some foods consumed in the United States contain "sugar from GM beets" is not true. While it is true that herbicide-tolerant sugar-beet seeds are

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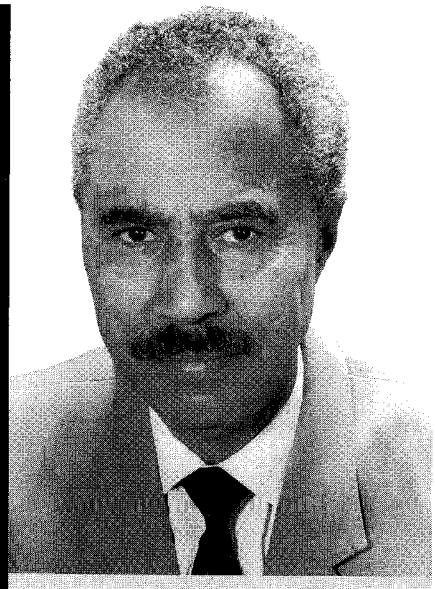
AN EVENING WITH...
Hans Massaquoi
IN CONVERSATION WITH JOAN RINGELHEIM



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TRB

FROM LONDON

Oh Mandy

On the face of it, Peter Mandelson doesn't have a lot going for him in British politics. He's gay. He's Jewish. He's what the English call "too clever by half." His ascent up what Benjamin Disraeli called the greasy pole of Westminster politics—MP, Cabinet member, *éminence rose*, Tony Blair's most trusted ally—was always precarious. So it's unsurprising that the boot has truly gone into the poor man these past couple of weeks. His fate, however, is of more significance than just another passing scandal. He was a critical member of the troika that reinvented the British Labour Party as a centrist, reformist, triumphant force. (The other two were Blair himself and Gordon Brown, current chancellor of the exchequer and Blair's likely successor.) Mandelson's untimely demise may do to "New Labour" what Al Gore's campaign and Bill Clinton's pardons have temporarily done to the New Democrats—namely, knock off the "New."

The facts of Mandelson's resignation from the government are simple. He allegedly made a call to a high-ranking British bureaucrat about expediting the British passport applications of two very wealthy Indian businessmen. Those businessmen had helped bankroll the Millennium Dome, the vacuous embarrassment in Greenwich for which Mandelson was once responsible and which remains a creaking symbol of what some see as the emptiness of Blair's administration. The scandal was made worse by the fact that Mandelson quit the government a couple of years ago over a large private mortgage loan from another wealthy businessman with government dealings. (Mandelson's importance to Blair's modernizing project can be inferred from the fact that Blair gladly brought Mandelson back into government as soon as the dust had settled from this first screwup.) With this second stumble, Mandy—as the homophobic tabloids routinely call him—had little choice but to leave the stage. The reaction from those on the left of the Labour Party was close to ecstatic. They had despised and envied Mandelson almost as much as Blair had needed him.

The only trouble is that it's still not clear whether Mandelson ever made that telephone call. He said he didn't; then he said he did; then he said he couldn't remember; then he said he had a vague recollection. Last week, he stepped on a major Blair speech by telling a local radio station that the entire affair had been like a ghastly car accident about which he could recall very little. An inquiry is now going on, and it's possible Mandelson will be vindicated. But for the foreseeable future he's toast. And the implications for Blair's project are none too happy.

Private Eye, the biweekly satirical rag that generally has its finger on Westminster's pulse, featured on the cover of its current issue the TV picture of Mandelson and Blair grimly sitting through the House of Commons debate in which Mandelson was thrown overboard. In small cartoon sound balloons, Blair is whispering to Mandelson, "I'm very, very sorry," and Mandelson replies, "You will be." Inside the magazine, the anonymous Westminster correspondent describes why: "Together Blair and Mandy designed a romantic self-image for Labour politicians; they were to be men and women of destiny, noble pioneers of an exciting, modern, 'third way.' But the prime minister understands that deep down they remained a bunch of clapped out local government time servers and deadbeat trade union officials. Before Mandy shaved off their scrotty little moustaches and taught them how to comport themselves, they were completely unelectable and Blair fears they may quickly become so again."

Not quickly enough to lose the next election, though. Virtually everyone here believes Blair will call an election in early May, and even the Tories I've spoken to expect Labour to win another term—if by a smaller margin. But the deeper question is what such a victory would mean. Domestically Blair has proved, as Clinton did, that the center left is not a recipe for economic disaster. On the contrary, Labour has made the Bank of England independent, raised taxes only stealthily, and refused to undo any of the structural economic reforms enacted by the Tory government in the 1980s and '90s. Inflation just dropped again, to 1.8 percent, and the unemployment rate is still half that of mainland Europe. This is an unimpeachable achievement in exactly the way the Clinton boom was. But it could also credibly be seen as mere Toryism implemented by former lefties.

New Labour's key pledge, after all, wasn't just that it would manage the economy well. It vowed to remove Tory sleaze and restore public services to their former glory—state schools and the National Health Service first among them. This, to be blunt, it hasn't done. New Labour has presided over money scandal after money scandal, and the polls now show that the public sees it as indistinguishable from the Tories on the "good-government" index.

To make matters worse, every week the papers come up with new horror stories about the continuing mediocrity of the state-run health and education services. A headline in Tuesday's *Times* proclaimed, "BLAIR TO AXE 'BOG STANDARD' STATE SCHOOLS." (The phrase "bog standard" means exactly what it appears to mean.) Meanwhile, the socialized-medicine system is still creaking, despite the huge sums of money being poured into it. The public is willing to give Blair another chance, but it's getting restless. The old Labour voting base seems particularly turned off by the failure. That's why Blair is rattled. He's worried—exactly the way Gore was—that without some old-time, left-wing religion, his base vote won't show up at the polls and his soft 20-point lead could dwindle to five points.

Or worse. Bob Shrum and Stanley Greenberg are threatening to show up and do for Blair what they did for Gore and Ehud Barak. The Brits seem completely uninterested in politics right now, suggesting a poor election turnout in May that could rival those in the U.S. and Israel. Moreover, the only truly electrifying issue in the election—whether Britain should abandon its own currency in favor of the euro—tilts heavily against Blair. Polls now show huge majorities in favor of retaining the pound, and last week, under relentless pressure from Tory leader William Hague (who is, I should disclose, an old friend), Blair committed himself to a referendum on the matter by 2003.

Blair is a canny and charming pol, of course, and he may rebound. But he looks increasingly haggard and bereft; I hadn't seen him up close for a while, and in the Commons this week he looked as if he'd aged a decade in three years. Barring a miracle, he'll win the election and lose the referendum. And then the knives will come out. Brown, more skeptical of the euro than Blair is and much more sympathetic to the left, will make his move, and New Labour will recede into history. Blair will have lost his closest and smartest ally and the most important political debate in Britain in a generation. The Labour left is already itching for revenge against Blair—and it shows every sign that, sooner rather than later, it will get it.

ANDREW SULLIVAN

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Playing Defense

HAS GEORGE W. BUSH broken his campaign promise on defense? During the campaign, he blasted Bill Clinton and Al Gore for allowing military strength to decline. "America's Armed Forces need better equipment, better training, and better pay," said Bush, with an eye toward the Republican-leaning military vote. When Bush prevailed, you could almost hear the Pentagon brass rubbing their hands in anticipation of the budget windfall sure to cascade their way.

It isn't coming, at least not right now. This week, Bush announced that, aside from some increases in pay and benefits for military personnel, he'll give the Pentagon no more than what Clinton offered in his final budget. And he won't pledge to increase that figure in the near future. The Joint Chiefs, who were hoping for an immediate $10 billion to $30 billion in additional weapons spending, must be flabbergasted. More hawkish and less partisan conservatives are screaming betrayal.

They're wrong. During the campaign, Bush slyly led the military to believe he'd boost spending, but he never actually said he would. It was Gore who pledged an additional $12 billion infusion into the Pentagon's budget. What Bush said was that he wanted a total rethinking of the Pentagon's structure, to move the U.S. military beyond cold war assumptions, before spending additional money. He even announced that he planned to "skip a generation" of military technology. Aerospace executives assumed Bush was kidding, since this would involve canceling several expensive, entrenched weapons currently in the pipeline. Now it turns out he may actually have meant what he said. If that's true, it's by far the best thing he's done in his first month on the job.

Since the Soviet Union's collapse, no fewer than seven blue-ribbon commissions have examined the Pentagon's structure. Each has recommended major institutional revamping to take account of the changed post-cold-war environment, and each has been ignored on any point that threatens the services' bureaucratic turf. Now President Bush has authorized a "top-down" review of Pentagon priorities. (Purists may argue the relative merits of "top-down" or the "bottom-up" review done under Clinton.) To be sure, in Washington, announcing a commission is often the same as announcing that nothing will change. But there is evidence that this White House may be serious. First, Bush selected Donald Rumsfeld as defense secretary: A former fighter pilot and Pentagon boss, Rumsfeld can't be snowed by briefers. Second, Vice President Dick Cheney is known to be intolerant of military B.S.: As defense secretary he canceled the Navy's A-12 stealth fighter program, stunning aerospace industry executives who assumed that defense spending would be safe under a Republican president. Third, as a conservative Republican Bush enjoys a stature with the officer corps that Clinton always lacked. He may be able to push through a defense shakeup for the same reason Clinton pushed through welfare reform—his base has nowhere else to go.

In an encouraging sign, Bush has turned over the review to Andrew Marshall, a longtime Defense Department analyst whom the brass have been trying to get rid of for years. Marshall drives the Joint Chiefs to distraction by producing internal Pentagon studies suggesting that U.S. land forces are too ponderous, U.S. supercarrier battle groups are too vulnerable to anti-ship missiles, and the Air Force is concentrating too much money on a few extremely expensive planes, like the B-2 bomber and the proposed F-22 fighter. Marshall is also known to oppose the Pentagon's half-century-old "roles and missions" pie-dividing arrangement, under which each service gets about the same annual share of funds regardless of what would make the military strongest overall. Nearly all reformers agree that the Pentagon needs a unified budget under which the Joint Chiefs, not the individual services, determine spending priorities. If the Marshall panel recommends this, as it likely will, and if Bush supports it, it will do more to strengthen the military than would all the billions of dollars demanded by Bush's right-wing critics.

Does defense need more money? Eventually, yes. The military is moderately underfunded, and the "procurement holiday" that the Reagan buildup allowed has now ended, meaning the Pentagon needs new weapons systems. But it shouldn't get them until someone figures out how they fit into a coherent, forward-looking plan for force structure in the post-cold-war age. By keeping his checkbook closed until that day arrives, Bush has shocked many of his supporters and infuriated America's top military officers. Nice going. ■

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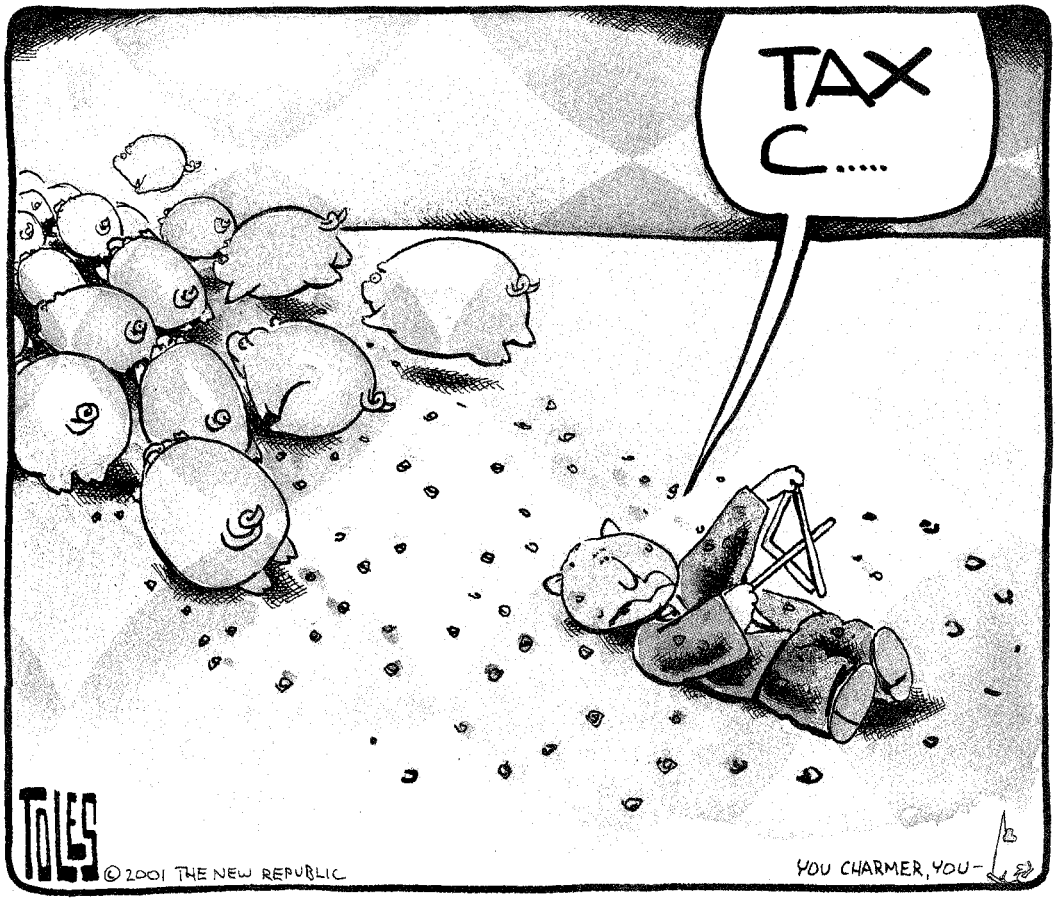
NOTEBOOK

ON SECOND THOUGHT, SANITY: To hear the media tell it, George W. Bush's $1.6 trillion tax cut plan is practically a fait accompli. Conservative Democrats are bound to support it, just as they backed Ronald Reagan's 1981 budget buster. And when it comes to salivating Republicans, the only question is whether they'll demand something *bigger*. It's a done deal. Or maybe not. True, Democratic Senator Zell Miller has already embraced Bush's plan. But another prime candidate for defection, Louisiana Democrat John Breaux, says he prefers a cut only about half as large. Meanwhile, the House's famously conservative 33-member Blue Dog coalition opposes the Bush plan outright, insisting on far more debt reduction. And there may be at least as many nervous GOP senators as wavering Democratic ones. Three Republicans on the Senate Finance Committee, which must approve the cut, are already hedging. Last week Vermont's Jim Jeffords told CNN that the Bush plan is unfair and that he would "vote to cut it." Fellow committee member Olympia Snowe of Maine insists upon a "trigger" tying any cuts to the size of the surplus. Even Finance Committee Chairman Charles Grassley of Iowa told *Roll Call* this week, "I guess I would say it probably has to be scaled back." Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania and Lincoln Chafee of Rhode Island also want a surplus "trigger" and suggest even that might not satisfy them. "I campaigned against [the Bush plan] because I think it's too high," Chafee told CNN. Debt-obsessed George Voinovich of Ohio is hardly an automatic vote either. And then there's Arizona Senator John McCain, who attacked the Bush plan during the campaign as reckless and regressive. All this even before the Democrats' p.r. counteroffensive reaches full steam. When Miller and Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan embraced Bush's tax cut, their endorsements launched a thousand front-page stories. So when will the media break all this bad news to Bush?

DEPENDS ON WHAT THE MEANING OF KNOW IS: The Bush administration finally found a credentialed economist to support its tax cut this week when Harvard's Martin Feldstein defended it in testimony before Congress. Feldstein said exactly what Feldstein always says: Cutting marginal tax rates will produce large economic benefits, which means Bush's tax cut will cost far less than its $1.6 trillion sticker price. This sort of ideological dependability is what makes Feldstein so useful to Republicans (see "Dr. Feelgood," by Jonathan Cohn, TNR, June 19, 2000). It also makes him prone to being horribly wrong. In 1993 Feldstein crusaded against President Clinton's upper-income tax hike, prophesying that "[t]here is no possibility that the Clinton plan will produce the deficit reduction that it predicts" and that it "would produce little or no additional revenue, but would weaken the economy." The last eight years have violently confounded both these predictions, without eliciting so much as an "oops" from Feldstein. At this week's hearing, Feldstein was asked whether his predictions of eight years ago had been borne out. "The truth is," he replied, "we don't know." Speak for yourself.

BUSH'S CHINA POLICY: It's not just the administration's apologists who are being disingenuous. The dishonesty starts at the top. Despite independent evaluations showing that his tax cut would eat up most, or all, of the available budget surplus over the next decade, President Bush continues to insist that it leaves plenty of money for other priorities. Why, then, has the White House taken on the air of a cash-strapped upper-class family, trying to keep up airs while quietly selling off the silverware? First, Bush announced he would break into the Medicare lockbox on the pretense of using Medicare money "for Medicare." Soon after, he shocked his supporters by declaring he would not significantly bolster defense



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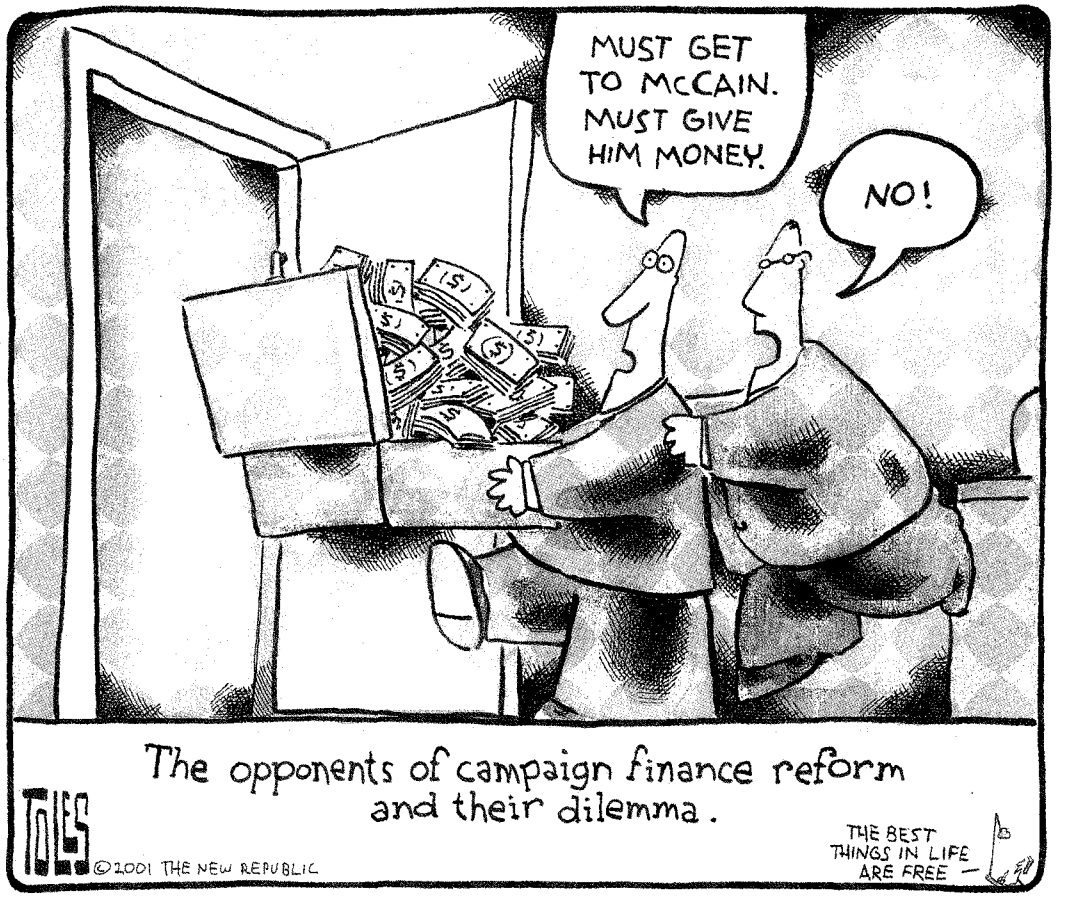
spending for next year, at least, pending the outcome of a defense review. Then the White House decided that virtually every federal department other than education would have its budget cut. What's objectionable is not so much the decisions themselves—as this week's editorial argues, Bush's military review is a good idea—but the pretense that they stem from anything but a desperate lunge to scrape up the necessary cash to keep his tax cut from plunging the budget back into the red. "Our defense vision," said Bush, "will drive our defense budget, not the other way around." Actually, it is precisely the other way around.

SOME TRICK, ALL RIGHT: "For six years Mr. Bush gave Texans tax cuts and balanced budgets. If he can accomplish that trick in Washington, we could be in for an era of unprecedented prosperity."—Stephen Moore and Stephen Slivinski, *Wall Street Journal* op-ed page, February 12

"As President Bush promotes his $1.6 trillion, 10-year income-tax cuts here, back in Texas, state legislators are so pinched after two tax-cut plans he won as governor that they are talking of tapping a state rainy-day fund or even raising taxes."—*Wall Street Journal* news story, same day

PRICE OF ADMISSION: This week on "Hannity & Colmes" former Green Party candidate Ralph Nader once again insisted that his quixotic presidential campaign didn't cost Al Gore Florida—and with it the presidency. But this time he came armed with numbers to back up his case. "Well," said Nader, "Clinton's pollster, Stan Greenberg, said—and the exit polls—for every one hundred votes I got, twenty-five would have voted for Bush, thirty-eight would have voted for Gore, and the rest wouldn't have voted at all." Yes, and according to that calculation, had Nader not been in the race, Gore would have won Florida by more than 12,000 votes. Congratulations, Ralph—admission is the first step to recovery.

JUST CALL HEART ATTACKS A MARKET FAILURE: The *Wall Street Journal* editorial board has never been shy about proposing the free market as a model for everything from education to medical care to the environment. But the board may have stretched the metaphor a little far this week when it extended Adam Smith's dicta to the human genome. Noting this week's revelation that our genome may be shorter—and its component genes therefore more complex—than previously thought, the *Journal* suggested that gene therapy, the attempt to cure disease by changing genetic makeup, may be a dead end. The human genome, you see, is like the free market, "a surprisingly efficient network of actors working individually ... creating a harmonious concert of the whole." Just as government intervention into the market wrecks this "harmonious concert," "attempts at manipulating [genes] in one way may have unanticipated consequences, disturbing an equilibrium necessary for the well-functioning of the whole." The problem, of course, is that the genetic "equilibrium" the *Journal* praises is far from complete: Interactions between our genes cause diseases ranging from cancer to late onset diabetes. Gene therapy, like any other medicine, seeks to fix the problem by imposing order—call it modest government regulation—from the outside. Perhaps one day they'll even develop a genetic cure for editorial obsession with the Clintons.


MUST GET TO McCAIN. MUST GIVE HIM MONEY.
NO!
The opponents of campaign finance reform and their dilemma.
TOLES
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AND THEY SAID D'AMATO HAD GOOD CONSTITUENT SERVICE: "Nader says his office has called [Hillary Clinton] 16 times asking for an apology because she chimed in 'that's not a bad idea' when, on election night, a Clinton friend suggested killing Nader."—*The Boston Globe*, February 7 ■

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White House Watch

Royal Treatment

By Ryan Lizza

Representative Chris John, a conservative Blue Dog Democrat from Louisiana, was at the White House last Thursday for one of President Bush's now-famous bipartisan bull sessions on tax cuts. Meeting in the Cabinet Room with Bush and a handful of House and Senate members, John laid out the Blue Dogs' case for a smaller tax cut and greater debt reduction. But John wasn't really there to talk taxes. As Bush took notes, a dapper man seated behind the president eyed John silently. Nicholas Calio, director of the White House Office of Legislative Affairs and Bush's top lobbyist on Capitol Hill, knew what the Cajun congressman really wanted. After the meeting Calio spoke with John, one of the few representatives he didn't already know. "Listen," he said, "we're trying to honor your request." Then the negotiations began.

John left the White House and, working with a Calio staffer named Ginger Gregory, began hammering out an agreement. Bush was already on board. "The president was told about it and said, 'Yeah, we should do that,'" Calio told me later. But, says John, "We had a lot of work to do from the time I left the White House till when ... it wrapped up." Finally, at about 1 a.m. on Friday, John faxed the White House the final details. At 8:30 a.m., the deal was consummated: Bush stood in the Rose Garden surrounded by John, Louisiana's Rice Queen and Crawfish Queen, and about 40 other young women dressed in Mardi Gras sashes and crowns. "He came out and took a quick picture with us, and all the princesses and queens were very, very happy," says the equally thrilled congressman. "Calio made it all happen, and he didn't have to do that."

The media focuses on the big debates—tax cuts, education, missile defense—but much of the reason for the Bush administration's early success is its focus on little things. And much of the reason for that focus is Calio. From the White House's perspective, Congress is not two solid blocks of Democrats and Republicans so much as 535 rather petty men and women who need to satisfy the folks back home—and often care more about pumping money into their districts or getting their constituents VIP tours of the West Wing than debating questions of national policy. And Calio has spent years learning how to feed the congressional beast.

After law school and a stint as a lobbyist for the National Association of Wholesaler-Distributors, Calio served as George H.W. Bush's liaison to the House. He left for the private sector but returned to run the entire legislative affairs office in 1992, when Bush senior was trying to burnish his domestic policy bona fides. When Bush lost the election, Calio teamed up with Democrat Larry O'Brien to build one of Washington's most successful lobbying shops. (The small firm took in more than $3 million in revenue last year.) Two months ago, W. convinced Calio to return to the White House job he held in 1992, taking an enormous pay cut. "The question is," says Representative Rob Portman, who worked with Calio in Bush I and is now the Republican leadership's liaison to the new administration, "why is this guy crazy enough to do this again?"

But, while some consider working with an almost evenly split Congress a thankless task, Calio sees the battlefield as a vast improvement over what he faced in his last White House gig. "Everybody keeps focusing on the Democratic numbers now," he says, but "take a look at what they were then. There were one hundred sixty-two House Republicans, and I think there were forty-three Republican senators. Fifty-fifty and two hundred twenty-one or two hundred twenty-two look pretty good."

If Calio can turn those numbers into Bush victories, it will be largely because of two key skills. First, he's a master of mobilizing outside grassroots groups to complement his inside horse-trading. Of Calio's efforts on behalf of the 1986 tax bill, a Democratic friend remembers, "Nick was tireless and masterful at coordinating outside efforts to persuade members that tax reform was a good thing." This time around, the White House is already working closely with groups like Americans for Tax Reform and other conservative organizations to build momentum for the Bush tax cut. And Bush adviser Karl Rove, who will be instrumental in such grassroots efforts, reportedly has been boning up on the laws governing what the administration can and can't coordinate with outside allies.

And then there's Calio's skill at using White House perks to woo wavering members. Trips aboard the president's plane, visits by popular administration officials to members' districts, federal pork, White House tours, the presidential box at the Kennedy Center, invitations to state dinners, and so forth are coordinated by the Office of Legislative Affairs. It is no coincidence that last week, when Bush visited a military base in Georgia, he was accompanied on Air Force One by Democrat Zell Miller, who broke party ranks to sponsor Bush's tax plan, and Charlie Norwood, who last week took a bullet for Bush by dropping his support for Arizona Senator John McCain's HMO-reform bill. "You can use it as a reward," says Calio. "People like to fly on Air Force One."

During Bush I, Calio kept background files on members of Congress and monitored their loyalty to the White House, and presumably he is doing the same now. "We once yanked Kennedy Center tickets for one member, he had so often refused to vote with us," Calio told author Bradley Patterson for his recent book, *The White House Staff*. A review of some of Calio's files, now stored at the Bush presidential library in Texas, shows assiduous attention to members' requests. When Calio sent rabid Democrat Chuck Schumer a picture of Schumer and the president, Schumer sent it back with a request for an autograph. Calio returned the photo with the president's signature a few days later. "Please let me know if there is anything else you would like me to do," Calio added in a signed note. When a vote approached, Calio's staff would blanket the Hill. "[W]e would place ourselves all over

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And Now: The British Election

Gerald A. Dorfman is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution.

The presidential election was so absorbing that few have noticed that our closest ally, Britain, is getting ready for its own national election. British politics is always fascinating and sometimes provides a lead, as when Margaret Thatcher took office in 1979 a year and a half before Ronald Reagan. The ideas known as "Thatcherism" still heavily influence politics in both countries.

Britain's election this year should prove quite instructive for Americans. The opposition Conservative Party is hoping to win using President Bush's theme of "compassionate conservatism." But at this point, political analysts expect the Conservatives to fail by a wide margin. Why? **What currently makes British politics so different from American politics?**

Both countries followed similar paths after World War II, first by embracing the managed economy and the welfare state and then by accepting the new conservatism of Thatcher and Reagan, which produced significant political change in each country.

Bill Clinton and then Tony Blair, however, masterfully led Democratic and Labour Party resurgences. Taking up electorally attractive Reagan-Thatcher conservative agendas, Clinton and Blair succeeded in arguing that only the Democratic and Labour Parties could govern conservatively with a caring face. Republicans and British Conservatives were politically outflanked. Further, prosperity in both countries made it even more difficult for them to regain power.

George W. Bush's election, however close, was thus indeed remarkable. Many aspects of the campaign went his way, but a key element was how skillfully he used the theme of "compassionate conservatism" to turn the tables on the Democrats and win over just enough independent voters.

"Compassionate conservatism" should therefore be a good recipe for British Conservatives. Indeed, British Conservatives have been pressing this message for a year. But as of now it looks like Tony Blair and Labour will enjoy a big win. Why?

The answer may well be a matter of timing. **One of the many factors that decide elections is the political life cycle;** elected governments often become old and vulnerable. In part, the political life cycle hurt the Republicans in 1992 after their twelve years in the White House. Furthermore, the Conservatives in Britain showed a lack of ideas, talent, integrity, and just plain "steam" after eighteen straight years in power—and were defeated overwhelmingly in 1997.

Conversely, the Republicans in 2000 showed their hunger and zest to return to power after eight years out, while the Democrats were clearly less energized. But the Conservatives in Britain, who have been out of power less than four years, are still squabbling among themselves about philosophy, policies, and leadership. They look like 1996 Republicans, whereas Tony Blair's Labour Party is imitating Democrats and Bill Clinton in 1996.

We are always learning more about politics, and Britain's upcoming election may offer another lesson. Of the many factors affecting elections, the political life cycle can be very important, especially when policy differences between the political parties are slight, as they have been in this era.

— Gerald A. Dorfman

Paid for by the Hoover Institution, Stanford University.

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the Capitol," Calio told Patterson. "When the bells went off, the call was: Who's taking elevators? Who's taking subway? Who's taking stairs?... We covered all the doors. We would catch 'em everywhere."

But, for all Calio's skill, Bush senior's lack of sustained attention to congressional affairs doomed his legislative strategy. George W. Bush is determined not to repeat his father's mistakes. "They [W.'s staff] believe that the success or failure of his administration will hinge on how well they do with Congress," says Portman. To that end, Bush's White House is borrowing a Reagan administration innovation called the "legislative strategy group." Under Reagan, Chief of Staff James Baker used the group to coordinate the White House policy, communications, political, and legislative affairs shops so they could most effectively lobby Congress. In W.'s administration, Bush's strategy group will consist mostly of the senior White House staff, including Andrew Card, Karl Rove, Karen Hughes, Josh Bolten, Calio, and, when necessary, the relevant Cabinet secretaries. "It's supposed to be a small group designed to make decisions on a streamlined basis and then make sure that they get implemented," says one knowledgeable source.

Conservative Democrats, prime targets of the White House effort, couldn't be happier about the attention they're getting. On the Saturday night after the Rice and Crawfish Queens photo-op, Calio showed up at the annual Washington Mardi Gras party, held at the Washington Hilton. He bumped into John, who was dressed in a sequined outfit and mask. When John took off his mask, Calio immediately recognized him. The congressman was tickled. "It's mass chaos in there. Everybody's throwing moon pies and beads everywhere," he says. "We had only met twice. And for him to recognize me in the dim light—and I had leotards and a costume on." ■

Russ Feingold's strange obsession with process.

True to Form

By PETER BEINART

"YOU'VE GOT TO give Russ Feingold credit," muttered Illinois Democrat Richard Durbin after Feingold cast the only Democratic vote against a Senate motion to dismiss the impeachment trial of President Clinton in January 1999. It remains a common sentiment. In a Senate Democratic Caucus divided among predictably liberal Northern Democrats, predictably moderate Southern Democrats, and the predictably opportunistic Robert Torricelli, Feingold stands out as the one guy likely to surprise you. While most of his Democratic colleagues long ago took Clintonesque dives on the death penalty, the Wisconsin Democrat continues to oppose it passionately. While most Democrats support campaign finance reform on two conditions—that it doesn't include labor unions and that it has no chance of passing—Feingold is actually sincere. In his 1998 reelection effort, he applied the McCain-Feingold limits to his own campaign, and when the Democratic Party tried to run ads on his behalf, he told it to buzz off. Feingold was one of the few Democrats to call for an independent-counsel investigation into Clinton's 1996 fund-raising, and he infuriated the White House by voting with Republicans to proceed with the impeachment trial and to depose witnesses. And last month he defied his Democratic brethren on the Judiciary Committee, voting to confirm John Ashcroft as attorney general.

ALL THIS HAS led some Democratic partisans to curse Feingold's name, but overall it's been a savvy route to Beltway prestige. Feingold shares more with Arizona Senator John McCain than just a campaign finance reform bill; he's following the same career playbook. In a Senate whose leaders can no longer really punish renegades and in a city where journalists throw around the terms "maverick" and "bipartisan" like bouquets, defying your own party can get you pretty far. After his vote for the impeachment trial, *The New York Times* wrote, "Mr. Feingold's political career has been marked by principled stands that flouted conventional wisdom or party unity." During his 1998 reelection bid, *USA Today* said a Feingold loss would mean "Halloween all year long."

But there's a difference between Feingold and McCain. In 1998 and 1999, McCain's various heresies—campaign finance, tobacco, Kosovo—seemed genuinely idiosyncratic. But since his presidential run, they've coalesced into a consistent pattern: It's called liberal Republicanism. With his recent endorsement of Democratic positions on a patients' bill of rights and perhaps even gun control, McCain has become a kind of supercharged James Jeffords. He's a "maverick" because his positions are unusual in the Republican Party and in his state, not because they're unique to him.

Feingold is a stranger case. His heresies don't follow an ideological pattern; they follow an anti-ideological one. Or, put another way, Feingold's ideology is process. He breaks with his party because, time and again, he places procedure over substance. When he first ran for the Senate in 1992, he posted a list of promises on his garage door: He would keep his primary residence in Wisconsin, he would visit each county every year, he would not miss a vote, he would refuse a pay raise, and he would finance his campaigns with in-state money. Not one promise concerned policy. When Feingold stood for reelection six years later, he ran a kind of meta-campaign, focusing more attention on his refusal to air attack ads or to raise more than one-quarter of his funds out of state than on Social Security, education, or any of the other issues that usually dominate Democratic campaigns (see "Fussy Russ," TNR, November 23, 1998). On impeachment, Feingold voted with his Democratic colleagues to acquit, but he defied them on procedural questions, such as whether the

TNR editor Peter Beinart's weekly column, "Punditry," can be read in THE NEW REPUBLIC ONLINE (*www.thenewrepublic.com*).

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trial should include witnesses.

Feingold's obsession with procedure reached new heights last month with his support for Ashcroft. When it came time to explain his Judiciary Committee vote, Feingold began by evaluating the various controversies dogging the former Missouri senator's nomination. Regarding Ashcroft's interview with *Southern Partisan* and his honorary degree from Bob Jones University, Feingold said: "I was not happy with the adequacy of John's answers on those issues. I think it does raise some questions of insensitivity." On Ronnie White, the African American judge whose elevation to the federal bench Ashcroft shot down: "just plain unfair ... an extremely sorry chapter in Senator Ashcroft's long public record." On Ashcroft's opposition to desegregation in St. Louis: "certainly troubling." On James Hormel, the gay philanthropist whose nomination to be ambassador to Luxembourg Ashcroft tried to kill: "unwarranted ... a pretty sorry chapter." On Paul Offner's charge that Ashcroft asked him about his sexual orientation in a job interview: "[T]he Offner account does bother me." Feingold did cite "the strength of John Ashcroft's commitments and answers to our tough questions, which were given under oath" as reason to grant him the benefit of the doubt. But then he went on to say, "It is completely understandable to me that critics would regard this as a confirmation conversion."

In short, Feingold viewed Ashcroft's record the same way all his Democratic colleagues did. Where he differed was his "view of the Cabinet nomination process." For Feingold, what mattered was redeeming a process that "has been abused and overly politicized." The Wisconsin senator said, "I don't want to be a part of taking the United States Senate and this country farther down that road, a road which John Ashcroft and others in his party paved in recent years." Feingold would vote for Ashcroft to show that he was better than Ashcroft, to make sure Ashcroft received the fair treatment he denied nominees like White and Hormel.

WITH THIS ARGUMENT, Feingold fell into the trap of high-minded reformers throughout American history: confusing procedural equivalence with moral equivalence. If the problem with Ashcroft's treatment of Hormel was that Ashcroft didn't afford President Clinton enough deference in his appointment of ambassadors, then the appropriate response would be to show President Bush's appointees greater deference. But the problem with Ashcroft's treatment of Hormel wasn't that he scrutinized President Clinton's appointee; it was that he opposed a man because he was gay. The principle at stake is not procedural, it's moral. And, as a result, the equivalence between Ashcroft and Hormel (that they are both presidential nominees) is not what matters. What matters is that one was the victim of bigotry and the other, the perpetrator. To atone for the mistreatment of the former by supporting the latter is absurd. It's like saying that because segregationists were wrong to filibuster the civil rights bills of the 1960s, black members of Congress would be wrong to filibuster legislation to repeal them.

Near the end of his monologue, Feingold said, "There are real fault lines emerging in our culture and in our political system, and repairs must be made. And some who have been harmed must be made whole." In Feingold's mind, by adhering to a principle that applies to all nominees, regardless of their beliefs, he was helping repair those "fault lines." By overlooking Ashcroft's record, he was bringing the country together. And that's the proceduralist delusion: that if you get the process right—by figuring out how much deference presidential nominees deserve or how much money candidates should spend—you can avoid taking sides politically. But the problem with American politics isn't money, it's some people's money; and the problem with the appointments process isn't that nominees aren't granted deference, it's that the right ones aren't granted deference. Sometimes fault lines shouldn't be repaired; one side deserves to win. If Russ Feingold really wanted to make James Hormel "whole," he would have "harmed" John Ashcroft. For his failure to understand that, Feingold deserves no credit at all. ■

Honor killings vs. Islam.

Faith of Her Fathers

By ELIZA GRISWOLD

LATE LAST MONTH, Bariya Ibrahim Magazu, a 17-year-old Nigerian street hawker and mother of a one-month-old son, stood surrounded by dozens of neighbors, waiting to be flogged. She claimed three men, friends of her father, had raped her in Zamfara, the first of five states in northern Nigeria to adopt *sharia*, Islamic law, last year. For the crime of having sex out of wedlock, Magazu was sentenced to 180 lashes with a whip. But, in a gesture of "leniency," only 100 of those lashes were administered, a concession made because Magazu withdrew her accusation of rape.

Yet another example of Islam's willingness to savagely disregard women's rights in the name of family honor—or not? While it's true that fundamentalist religious leaders endorsed Magazu's flogging, they did so in violation of explicit Islamic codes that grant her the right to appeal their decision, to receive only 20 strokes (since she's under 18), and to postpone her flogging until after she finishes breast-feeding. In fact, the honor killings and punishments that opponents and apologists routinely describe as Islamic are usually not Islamic at all, but distortions based upon pre-Islamic custom. It's not hard to understand why the defenders of honor killing would call such practices Islamic—it lets them cast critics as hostile to their faith. The real question is why those critics keep playing into their hands.

Though honor killing—murdering a girl or woman for her

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perceived loss of chastity—takes place predominantly in Muslim countries, the belief that a woman's virginity belongs to her family long predates Islam. The concept's roots can be found in the 1752 B.C. Code of Hammurabi and as far back as the Assyrian legal code of 3000 B.C., in which men who committed rape were punished with the rape of their own wives.

Sharia was laid down partly to protect women from these codes. According to hadith, or Islamic tradition, the laws against *zina*, or fornication, came into effect after Muhammad's last wife, the lovely Aisha, disappeared with a good-looking soldier to find a necklace lost somewhere between Mecca and Medina. A slew of rumors ensued, and—according to the norms of Al Jahiliya, the seventh-century, pre-Islam period referred to by Muslims as the "Age of Ignorance"—Muhammad could have killed his wife for bringing shame on his house.

Instead, the prophet defended her, setting down a series of laws to safeguard women from murder by rumor. Under *sharia*, in cases of *zina* the burden of proof is enormous: Four Muslim men must witness the act in flagrante delicto. If the offending participants are married to others, both are put to death. If they are single, then 100 lashes with a whip suffice. If there are no witnesses, the allegation goes unpunished. "Having to prove *zina* to an impossible level is almost to say, 'Sexuality is none of your business,'" explains Abdullahi An-Na'im, professor of Islam at Emory University. "That message got lost in the effort to reinforce patriarchy and sexual domination—but the message remains embedded in the Koran." The Koran was also the first document to forbid the then-common cultural practice of *w'ad*: burying baby girls alive to keep them from bringing shame on their families later on.

Still, in most predominantly Muslim countries today a daughter may be killed for losing her virginity—even if she's a victim of rape or rumor. In 1999, more than 1,000 Pakistani women were killed. In 1997, the most recent year for which statistics are available, roughly 400 were killed in Yemen. In 1999, honor crimes constituted more than two-thirds of all homicides in the West Bank and Gaza. But just because honor killings are common in Muslim countries doesn't mean they stem from Islam. In Jordan, which has a small Christian population, a Christian woman is just as likely as a Muslim woman to be one of the 25 to 30 women per year killed for their families' honor. "In countries like Brazil, like Peru, like other countries in Latin America," says human rights lawyer Asma Khader, killings in the name of so-called honor remain a problem.

INTERNATIONAL CONDEMNATION OF such killings has been growing in recent years. But it has not been growing more effective. And a key reason is that opponents have allowed themselves to be painted as hostile to Islam.

Take the case of Jordan, where three years ago the move to outlaw honor crimes began. Rana Husseini, a correspondent for *The Jordan Times*, was covering the crime beat when she began bringing honor killing to international attention. As enthusiasm for reform increased, Queen Rania condemned the crimes during an interview on French television. Then, just over a year ago, Crown Princes Ali and Ghazi led more than 5,000 people through the streets of Amman to protest honor killing. And, in a four-month period, a committee co-founded by Husseini to fight honor crimes collected 15,000 signatures to change a Jordanian law that allows for leniency in sentencing perpetrators. Chief Justice Izzeddine al-Khatib al-Tamimi, the king's adviser on Islamic affairs, told *The Jordan Times*, "Killers think their victims' blood is a medal representing their act of heroism or honor. They do not know that God's anger and curse will remain with them."

It looked as if the elected lower house of parliament, made up mostly of traditional tribal leaders, might heed the public outcry. Even Sarhan Abdullah, a 32-year-old man who spent only six months (the average sentence) in Juweidah prison, on the outskirts of Amman, for killing his sister in 1998, told a reporter in December that the punishment for honor killing should be harsher—execution, to be exact. "If families knew they would lose their sons, they would not do it," he said. "There's no religion that calls for taking the soul of a person."

BUT THEN THE liberal tide began to turn. A reform bill came down to the lower house from the king and the upper house of parliament, whose members the king appoints. Among their reasons for amending the law they cited human rights organizations and international pressure. Whether or not it was intended to (and some activists believe it was), the language ensured that the lower house wouldn't go along. And indeed, reported Husseini in *The Jordan Times*, the delegates condemned the bill as the latest in a long history of Western strong-arming. She went on to cite one former member of the lower house, the secretary-general of the international fundamentalist group Islamic Action Front (IAF), Abdul Latif Arabiyat, as saying, "This is a Western plot to destroy and corrupt our society, which is the last remaining fortress."

When the resolution to end honor crimes came before the lower house of parliament, an overwhelming majority of delegates voted against changing the law (which, ironically, was actually French—a remnant of the nineteenth-century Napoleonic Code). The IAF issued a fatwa saying the law should not change. The group said it was defending Islam from outside attack.

And in a sense it was. Consider what happened several months ago on the floor of the United Nations when a Dutch resolution condemning honor killing came up for debate. Just before the vote, the Dutch mission requested that Equality Now, an international human rights organization, show a documentary on honor killing. *Crimes of Honor*, made by Bishari Films, a Canadian company, told several stories—one the account of a girl who was killed by her family after running off with a new love. The film opened with a muezzin's call to prayer and showed footage of a public stoning in Iran. The Islamic delegates, looking for a reason (or an excuse) not to sign, claimed their religion had been smeared. The resolution passed—once its language was so weakened as to render it virtually meaningless—but 25 countries, mainly Arab (Jordan among them), abstained from signing.

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A passage from the Koran (as interpreted by Arthur Arberry, Sura II: 11. 165–168) reads, "And when it is said to them, 'Follow what God has sent down,' they say, 'No: but we will follow such things as we found our fathers are doing.'" It's a pretty good explanation of honor killings. If only the people trying to abolish them would take it to heart. ■

Who says conservatives like vouchers?

Credit Is Due

By Sarah Wildman

When, during his first weeks in office, President George W. Bush backtracked from his plan for school vouchers, the media swooned. He was finally dissing the Republican right. "That example stands in relative isolation," opined a front-page article in *The New York Times*, contrasting it with Bush's fealty to his conservative base on taxes, abortion, and Cabinet appointments. And when that base failed to rise up in fury at W.'s voucher surrender, it was viewed as a sign of deep allegiance to his fledgling presidency. When Bush "signaled that he was ready to negotiate on school vouchers," wrote an admiring *Washington Post*, "[c]onservatives barely squawked."

Of course they didn't—and it had little to do with their affection for W. The dirty secret of the school-vouchers debate is that many conservatives don't want them. The media continues to dub school choice a "conservative" issue, yet suspicion of vouchers stretches across major factions of the conservative movement. Bush hasn't taken a political risk on education, he's taken the path of least resistance—ditching vouchers in favor of a tax credit to offset the cost of private schools, an idea that has much more conservative support and much less redeeming value.

Anyone seeking evidence of GOP ambivalence on vouchers need look no further than a gaffe committed by the president himself on January 31 at a White House event for the leaders of Catholic charities. "There are a lot of Republicans who don't like vouchers," Bush whispered conspiratorially to the crowd, unaware that the podium mike was on, broadcasting his comments to the press. "They come from wealthy suburban districts who are scared to death of irritating the public school movement, and their schools are good." Bush is right. There's a reason most voucher proposals apply only to cities: Suburban voters, including suburban Republicans, fear vouchers would undermine their public schools. When vouchers were placed on the California ballot as Proposition 38 last fall, 53 percent of Republicans and 51 percent of self-described conservatives voted no. (A majority of Republicans voted against a voucher initiative in Michigan last year as well.) And among California voters earning more than $75,000 per year, opposition was 70 percent.

And suburban parents aren't the only voucher-averse group in the GOP; a significant portion of the Christian right isn't wild about vouchers either. Some religious conservatives see them as an opportunity to offset the cost of Christian schools, but many believe vouchers are simply an excuse for government intrusion. In particular, Christian conservatives fear that government funding of faith-based schools (like government funding of faith-based anti-drug or job-training programs) will give bureaucrats an excuse to forbid proselytizing and religious discrimination. "We don't want the government telling us how to structure our curriculum or them telling us who our students are," says John Holmes, director of government affairs at the Association of Christian Schools International. "We are aware of schools overseas, Christian schools—we're in a hundred different countries—where the government says, 'You must hire these people, this one is a Buddhist, this one a Hindu,' and they must come teach in a Christian school. Huh? What? We have the right of discrimination for religious reasons."

Such concerns led Christian conservatives to help defeat Proposition 38 last November. Cathy Duffy, author of the *Christian Home Educators' Curriculum Manual*, implored fellow Golden State religious conservatives to reject the proposition because it could impose "non-discrimination in admissions" and "allow ... children to opt out of religious activities." "This means," she wrote in an *Orange County Register* op-ed last October, "a Christian school cannot give preference to Christians and it must 'compartmentalize' religious activities.... [A] school's mission and character will be seriously undermined if it cannot share that mission with students." According to a Pew Research Center poll last September, evangelicals were slightly more hostile than the general population to vouchers.

And it's not just proselytizing and discrimination at issue. Christian conservatives tend to be highly suspicious of government in general and fear even those regulations that have nothing to do with religion. "Once we've received money from the federal government, with that money will come controls, guidelines, reports. And we don't want to be entangled with the federal government," says Charles Walker, education director at the American Association of Christian Schools. Tax credits, however, are another matter, because they help parents pay parochial-school tuition without attaching any regulatory strings. Walker describes them as "money to family, and family making decisions." Paul Weyrich, president of the Free Congress Foundation, concurs, describing tax credits as a way to offer families choice in education while ensuring there will be "no federal control of the schools."

Such arguments carry even more weight among Christian home-schoolers, who generally don't benefit from vouchers at all and fear they will bring meddling. "[T]he burdens that would be placed by government strings on those who receive vouchers is too dangerous to our freedom of private education," says Michael Farris, chairman of the Home School Legal Defense Association. Tax credits, by contrast, suit Farris—who believes the "proper role of federal government is to leave us alone"—just fine.

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Tax credits are also a popular alternative to vouchers within the libertarian wing of the party. Vouchers, says David Boaz, executive vice president of the Cato Institute, "are more than too far-reaching. They point in the wrong direction. We ought to be returning control of education to the states, and President Bush's [voucher] proposal tends to draw more power and control to the federal government." While Boaz believes that "even an income tax credit would be better done at the state level than at the federal level," he notes that, "of all the things the federal government might do to encourage education or educational choice, a tax credit is the least intrusive."

But while the media has focused extensively on W.'s backpedaling on vouchers, it has paid scant attention to the rise of tax credits as a bipartisan compromise. And so it has painted a picture of conservative retreat and liberal victory, when the reality is something closer to the reverse. While tax credits wouldn't have the negative impact Democrats associate most closely with vouchers—draining funds directly from public school budgets—neither would they offer vouchers' one clear benefit: enabling low-income kids to get out of failing public schools. After all, since the vast majority of people who get a tax credit are the ones rich enough to pay income taxes, it does virtually nothing for the very poor. In fact, Bush's proposal offers the credit to single parents earning up to $100,000 and couples earning up to $160,000. The tax credit "bumps up against the main message of pro-vouchers advocates, [that] this is something to help economically disadvantaged students," says National Education Association spokesman Michael Pons. It "predominantly benefits those families already sending kids to private schools and [who] have incomes sufficient to benefit from a tax credit or tax deduction." That, unfortunately, may be exactly the point. ■

Why the Catholic Church shouldn't have to hire gays.

Religious Rights

By JEFFREY ROSEN

AT THE END of January, President Bush signed an executive order removing impediments to charitable choice, which allows religious as well as secular organizations to administer federal social service programs. In the mid-'90s, when an aide to then-Senator John Ashcroft first proposed charitable choice, its opponents claimed it was an unconstitutional merger of church and state. But today most of them, thankfully, have abandoned that argument. In a series of cases over the past decade, the Supreme Court has replaced the rigid church-state separationism of the Warren and Burger eras with a healthy vision of religious neutrality. This vision holds that when the government delegates welfare services to the private sector, it must allow secular and religious organizations to compete on equal terms for contracts. As long as appropriate safeguards are in place—there must be genuine choice; that is, no beneficiary should be forced to receive government benefits in a religious setting—the Supreme Court is likely to uphold charitable choice in its current form. And it should.

Recognizing this new legal reality, most opponents of charitable choice have narrowed their attack. Instead of challenging the constitutionality of charitable choice as a whole, they now focus on its implementation. Continuing a policy that dates back to the civil rights era, Bush proposes to exempt religious organizations that receive government *funds from federal civil rights laws that prohibit discrimination* on the basis of religion. "Faith-Based Prescription for Discrimination," shrieks the ACLU's website. "Under the Bush initiative, for example, a Catholic church receiving public funds for literacy programs could fire a teacher for getting pregnant outside of marriage." But that's OK. In fact, preserving churches' ability to fire or refuse to hire people who reject their religious values is central to charitable choice; it is necessary to protect religious autonomy and state neutrality. As churches become more enmeshed in the welfare state, the exemptions Bush proposes from anti-discrimination laws shouldn't be scaled back. They should be expanded.

It may seem that religious organizations are asking for special treatment when they demand the right to engage in discrimination with public money, accepting public funds but not the restrictions that usually accompany them. But it's obvious, on reflection, that without the ability to discriminate on the basis of religion in hiring and firing staff, religious organizations lose the right to define their organizational mission enjoyed by secular organizations that receive public funds. As Ira C. Lupu of George Washington University Law School has argued, Planned Parenthood may refuse to hire those who don't share its views about abortion; equal treatment requires that churches, mosques, and synagogues have the same right to discriminate on ideological grounds. The Supreme Court accepted this reasoning in 1988, when it upheld religious nonprofits' exemption from the federal law prohibiting religious discrimination.

And by extending this exemption to religious groups that receive government funds, the charitable-choice law is careful to insist that these groups can discriminate in the hiring of staff but not in the treatment of beneficiaries. In other words, a Baptist church may refuse to hire Jews as drug counselors, but it may not refuse to serve Jews who ask for drug counseling. Under charitable choice, the requirements of anti-discrimination law extend not to providers but to beneficiaries.

IT'S NOT HARD to understand why faith-based organizations need to discriminate on the basis of religion to maintain their essentially religious character. A Jewish organization forced to hire Baptists soon ceases to be Jewish at all. Moreover, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, discrimination on the basis of religion seems different from discrimination on the basis of race and gender, because religion is becoming more a matter of choice and less a matter of birth. There are now black Jews and Asian evangelicals; and it's hard to see religion as

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immutable, or religious discrimination as invidious, when, in a multicultural age, religious identity is increasingly self-constructed. If you want to work in a Baptist soup kitchen, all you have to do is become a Baptist.

The harder question is whether faith-based organizations should be free to discriminate not only on the basis of religion but also on the basis of gender. In announcing the formation of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, John DiIulio, its new director, emphasized that religious groups receiving federal dollars would be prohibited by federal law from engaging in all sorts of other illegal discrimination, including discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, age, disability, HIV infection, or visual impairment. "Those things are a good part of the law, and no one's talking about changing those," DiIulio said at the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life on January 30. "If they were, I wouldn't be here."

But is it really so obvious that these requirements shouldn't be relaxed? The way some courts now interpret the federal prohibition on sex discrimination, for example, threatens the ability of churches to define their religious mission as much as bans on religious discrimination would. Two federal courts have refused to dismiss suits against church schools that fired employees who gave birth out of wedlock. A court in Michigan ruled against a Christian school that refused to hire women with small children. In the best-known case, a federal appeals court in Ohio held that the Dayton Christian School might be immune from suit for gender discrimination when it told a teacher who became pregnant that she couldn't return to her job because school officials believed that mothers with small children should stay at home. The court invoked a judicial doctrine dating to the 1970s, which holds that applying Title VII's prohibition on sex discrimination to the relationship between a church and its ministers violates the First Amendment's protections for religious association.

TRADITIONALLY, THIS DOCTRINE has allowed churches to discriminate on the basis of gender only in hiring and firing those with ministerial responsibilities; it hasn't protected their ability to fire custodial and non-ministerial staff who refuse to conform to traditional gender roles. In many religions, this distinction is consistent with religious practice: Conservative Jews, for example, refuse to ordain openly gay rabbis but welcome gay congregants. Nevertheless, it's not hard to imagine a situation in which a religious organization is forced to hire choir directors or drug counselors or secretaries whose lifestyles offend its conception of appropriate behavior, changing the group's character in the process. As charitable choice makes an increasing number of churches susceptible to federal regulation, courts and Congress might consider extending the exception to allow churches to discriminate on the basis of sex and sexual orientation when hiring and firing non-ministerial employees as well.

In this sense, the Dayton case poses a dilemma similar to the Boy Scouts case that the Supreme Court decided last June, in which the Court properly refused to prevent the Scouts from discriminating against a gay scoutmaster. Forcing the Scouts to hire those who reject their values, the Court held, would turn the group into something it isn't. To protect the integrity of their religious message, faith-based organizations, too, should be able to refuse to hire drug counselors whose lifestyles conflict with their traditional beliefs—that single women should remain chaste before marriage, for example, or shouldn't work without their fathers' consent. The Boy Scouts case suggests that religious and nonreligious private associations should receive exemptions from sex-discrimination laws whenever necessary to preserve their distinctive character.

This doesn't mean faith-based organizations should suffer no consequences if they discriminate on the basis of gender in hiring and firing. After the Boy Scouts won their Supreme Court case, there was a political firestorm, and several civic organizations broke their ties with the group, which is now openly associated with homophobia. Along the same lines, individual welfare recipients should be perfectly free to refuse drug counseling from churches that discriminate on the basis of gender or sexual orientation. To get an exemption from Title VII, churches should be forced to own up to the beliefs and practices that, in their view, prevent them from complying with the civil rights laws. In recent cases, some churches have taken the disingenuous position that they don't discriminate on the basis of sex but should be spared the requirement to defend their hiring and firing practices in court because the First Amendment gives them a blanket exemption from having to answer to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. In the spirit of the Boy Scouts case, faith-based organizations should be free to discriminate only if they are willing to take the political heat.

IN OPPOSING FAITH-BASED organizations' right to discriminate on the basis of sex and religion, opponents of charitable choice are being more tactical than principled. In today's political climate, openly opposing charitable choice—which was supported by Bill Clinton and Al Gore and is already embedded in four federal laws—is no longer tactically feasible. So its opponents are trying a stealth attack. As Nathan Diamant, public policy director of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations, puts it, "If the goal of charitable choice is to leverage the unique capacities of faith-based institutions with government grants, to force them to dilute their religious character in order to participate is a way of saying that you really don't believe in the whole notion."

But it's now time for defenders of charitable choice to go on the offensive. As faith-based organizations become increasingly subject to federal regulation, they should be exempted not only from the federal prohibitions on religious discrimination but from those on sex discrimination as well. There is an irreconcilable conflict between the democratic logic of anti-discrimination law and the hierarchical values that make faith-based organizations what they are. If faith-based organizations are to compete against secular ones on equal terms, they must be protected from anti-discrimination law to avoid being transformed into something they are not. Sometimes neutrality requires a little special treatment after all. ■

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How including religion will make government bigger.

Growth Spurt

By MARCIA YABLON

IT'S NO SECRET that George W. Bush doesn't like big government. It was one of his campaign mantras. "My opponent is promoting a big buildup of big government," he declared at a rally in Pittsburgh last October. "Make no mistake about it: more spending, more programs, more of Washington talking down to us and thinking on behalf of us—a bigger, more intrusive government." And last week Bush began making good on his pledge to cut government bureaucracy, launching an initiative to open federal coffers to faith-based charities. As Stephen Goldsmith, head of the advisory board that will oversee the program, said in an interview last week, government funding "ought to not be through bureaucracies but through partnerships with faith, community, and neighborhood organizations." The American Federation of Government Employees and the AFL-CIO are already fretting that Bush's plan threatens government jobs.

Really, they don't have much to worry about. Not only will W.'s faith-based initiative not reduce the public payroll, it will probably increase it. In fact, the expansion is already under way.

Since announcing his initiative two weeks ago, Bush has already created one new executive department, the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives; and its head, John DiIulio, expects to hire at least a dozen new employees. Encouraging additional growth, DiIulio's office will work closely with liaisons—perhaps as many as 100 new hires—in the Departments of Housing and Urban Development, Justice, Health and Human Services, Labor, and Education.

But the real bloating will come further down the bureaucratic food chain—at the state and local level, where thousands more employees will have to shepherd the new grants from Washington to your neighborhood church. Then they'll have to monitor your neighborhood church to make sure it doesn't use that money to proselytize to those seeking only social services and not salvation, and maybe even establish a secular charity to make sure churches aren't the only game in town. Far from shrinking government, according to John Green, a religion and politics scholar and director of the University of Akron's Bliss Institute, Bush's initiative will create "a burgeoning bureaucracy within a bureaucracy."

When the president announced his plan, he promised there would always be secular alternatives to faith-based programs. In urban centers that already boast a wide variety of social service providers, this promise will be easy to keep. But in rural communities with fewer alternatives, it could be a problem. As soon as a local Christian charity starts taking federal money, the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives (or its local offshoots) will need to ensure that a nonreligious option exists—even if that means opening one with government resources. Ironically, therefore, in order to strengthen religious charities without being coercive, Bush may have to create new secular ones. Says Joseph Conn, a spokesman for Americans United for Separation of Church and State, "Instead of reducing government, the act expands it.... It's adding funding for the growth of the social service bureaucracy."

IN A SENSE, the faith-based initiative resembles welfare reform, another effort that conservatives once predicted would reduce the size of government. It hasn't, because to make welfare reform work states had to provide a host of new services—job training, child care, transportation subsidies—that proved more expensive and bureaucratic than simply writing AFDC checks. For example, part of welfare reform was the delinking of welfare and Medicaid, which required an additional $500 million to create outreach programs and increase the participation of eligible children and families. "A lot of scholars concluded it [welfare reform] was a success, but it didn't make the [welfare] budget smaller," notes Green. In fact, the states with the most successful welfare reform efforts—for instance, Wisconsin under current Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson—were the ones that spent the most money. Ensuring that the faith-based initiative "works"—i.e., that it supports worthwhile programs without obliterating the separation of church and state—will require a similarly hefty dose of additional government oversight.

It's not just that government may have to establish secular charities so the needy have alternatives to religious programs. It will also have to oversee faith-based programs to make sure they aren't using public money to evangelize. When AmeriCorps was started in 1994, each state simultaneously created a commission to ensure the program's money was not used for religious proselytizing. Each of these commissions currently employs between 15 and 25 people and costs between $125,000 and $750,000 annually to operate. That's just for AmeriCorps, whose budget last year was only $433 million; Bush's faith-based initiative is pegged for $10 billion. And failing to monitor is not an option: In Texas, where then-Governor Bush implemented a similar faith-based effort, state authorities discovered that at Roloff Homes—a group of church-run facilities for troubled youths, reopened under the initiative—people were literally having Jesus beaten into them.

In fact, antsy union leaders in Washington should contact their locals in Texas, who would tell them there's nothing to worry about. "Bush's faith-based initiative didn't rise to the level where it was affecting existing jobs," explains Ed Sills, a spokesman for the Texas AFL-CIO. "It was not an issue we were fighting—and we were fighting a lot of issues under Governor Bush." So how can anti-bureaucracy conservatives love an initiative that provides bureaucracy-loving unions more jobs? They can't. They just haven't realized it yet. ■

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What religion cannot do.

Act of Faith

By BENJAMIN SOSKIS

THESE DAYS, WHEN President Bush talks about his newly established White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, the only gospel he seems to be preaching is deregulation. "Our plan will not favor religious institutions over nonreligious institutions," Bush declared in early February at the National Prayer Breakfast. "I am interested in what works." In the executive order creating the new office, Bush said he was simply allowing private charities and religious groups to "compete on a level playing field." The man Bush selected to head up the office, University of Pennsylvania sociologist John DiIulio, concurred, saying his main objective was "removing the barriers, ending the discrimination, leveling the playing field."

Don't believe him. Bush's initiative assumes that religion's power to transform lives is both unique and essential to the nation's welfare. And, once upon a time, Bush used to say so. As the former governor of Texas announced in a 1996 speech titled "We Need a Renewal of Spirit in This Country," "In the final analysis, there is no overcoming anything without faith—be it drugs or alcohol or poverty or selfishness or flawed social policy." It's a sentiment endorsed by believers on both sides of the aisle. Gary Bauer argues that "you can't successfully address the problems of the poor without addressing the spiritual aspect of their lives." And vice presidential candidate Joseph Lieberman flirted with the idea when he invoked George Washington's admonition "never to indulge the supposition 'that morality can be maintained without religion.'" Nor is the idea restricted to politicos: According to a 1999 Gallup Poll, 61 percent of Americans believe religion "can solve all or most of today's problems."

So perhaps it's no wonder that, in the weeks since Bush's announcement, hordes of commentators have insisted that faith-based organizations do a better job fixing society's ills than their sterile secular alternatives. As Catholic League President William Donohue told *The Washington Times*, "Faith-based initiatives not only work better than their secular counterparts, they do so at a fraction of the cost ... [and] it is the spiritual dimension of the programs that accounts for their success." Or, as journalist Tucker Carlson said on a recent episode of "Crossfire": "The fact is we don't just suspect that faith-based programs work best, we know it."

But the fact is we know no such thing. "The claim that religious organizations work better is completely without empirical basis," says Mark Chaves, professor of sociology at the University of Arizona. Indiana University School of Public Affairs's David Reingold, who is conducting one of the first systematic comparisons of the effectiveness of religious and nonreligious social service organizations for welfare recipients, says that, watching the Sunday talk shows, he was shocked by "how many times I heard pundits say social science has proven faith-based organizations are more effective.... [T]here's absolutely no research out there that systemically demonstrates this. From my perspective, it's a horrible exaggeration, to the point that it's fabrication."

To date, there is simply not enough research into faith-based programs to arrive at any but the most preliminary conclusions. This is partly because for years the academy didn't consider them a subject worthy of serious study. But religious organizations bear some blame as well, often preferring to publicize anecdotal evidence rather than the results of rigorous scientific scrutiny. Indeed, the phenomenal success rates of the two faith-based programs Bush mentioned most reverently on the stump—the drug-addiction program Teen Challenge and the prison-rehabilitation InnerChange Freedom Initiative—evaporate upon closer inspection. According to Michael Miller, spokesman for the American Society of Addiction Medicine, the studies Teen Challenge used to produce its 86 percent rehabilitation rate are marred by small sample size, an overreliance on self-reporting, and a failure to register dropout rates adequately. Similarly, Arizona's Chaves notes that InnerChange's extraordinary rehabilitation rates are called into question by both the fact that the organization selects the program's participants (a process he calls the "creaming bias") and that in the Texas prison system there is no organized secular alternative: "There's no nonreligious control group, no way to get a handle on the relative success of the religious program."

DiIulio admits as much. "[W]e do not really know whether these faith-based programs ... outperform their secular counterparts, how they compare to one another, or whether, in any case, it is the 'faith' in 'faith-based' that mainly determines any observed differences in outcomes," he wrote last September in *The Public Interest*. His candor is admirable, but Bush's leap of faith is no less precipitous when the man in charge of it shouts, "Geronimo!" As David Whittinghill, an expert on alcohol counseling at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, complains, "President Bush is all about accountability, but he's throwing this one to the wind."

Conservatives have railed against the secularization of American life for decades, but it wasn't until relatively recently that sociological studies seemed to validate their concerns. In 1985, Harvard University economist Richard Freeman published a report demonstrating an impressive correlation for poor inner-city youth between church attendance and resistance to crime and substance abuse. Propo-

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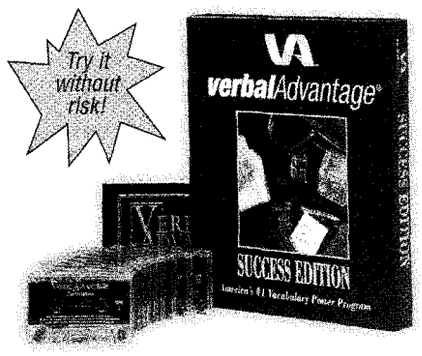

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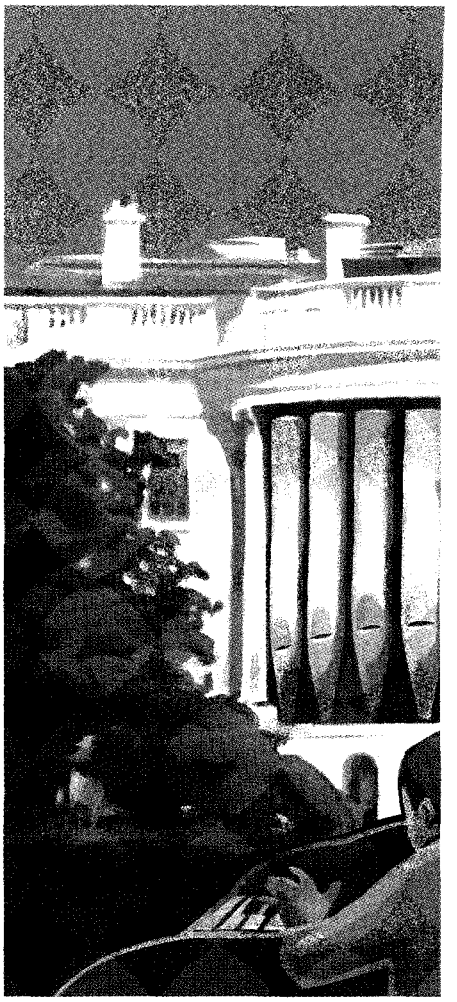
nents of faith-based organizations used Freeman's study and others like it to trumpet the power of faith to transform society. A 1993 Heritage Foundation report cited Freeman's research as evidence for its assertion that "[t]he church in the inner city can and should be our number one weapon in combating crime, poverty, family break up, and school failure." Or, as George Will contended earlier this month, "[I]t is demonstrable that there is a powerful correlation between sustained contact with religious people and institutions and reduced crime and substance abuse."

But, in the translation from the academy to the Beltway, the claims on behalf of faith-based organizations have grown far stronger than the sociological research can support. A correlation between organized religion and certain types of social health is not proof of causation: Just because fewer churchgoers are criminals, it doesn't follow that going to church reduces one's inclination toward crime. "[I]t's kind of reasonable that the kind of youth who are in church of their own free will, or are in families who make them go to church, are different kinds of persons from those who aren't," explains Chaves.

THE UNQUESTIONING FAITH in faith's instrumentality is also compromised by the fact that studies like Freeman's define religion institutionally—that is, through affiliation with or attendance at a church, synagogue, or mosque—and thus fail to differentiate between religion's social and doctrinal components. Recently, David Evans, professor of sociology and criminal justice at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, attempted to clarify this relationship by examining individuals according to three distinct measures of religiosity: religious beliefs (their attitudes toward the afterlife, divine retribution, etc.), religious salience (how important they claimed religion was in their lives), and religious activity (their "immersion in a church network" or "community of believers"). Evans found that the only measurement that significantly correlated with reduced levels of criminality was religious activity. His research, he says, suggests that "it is the social aspect of religion that makes it 'work' to save lives and souls, ... the interaction and bonding with a community of believers" rather than the transformative power of belief itself.

That might also be true for one of the programs lauded most often as a paragon of the hands-on, tough-love approach Bush's faith-based office will support: Boston minister Eugene Rivers's anti-crime Ten-Point Coalition. In the 1990s, Boston's homicide rate fell by 75 percent, and many attributed the drop to Ten-Point's presence. But, after an extensive study of the program, Harvard sociologist Christopher Winship concluded that its effectiveness was due less to the influence of a few dedicated, charismatic ministers than to its institutional role as "an intermediary ... between the police and the community" that created "an umbrella of legitimacy for fair and just policing." The moral leadership of the church was essential, Winship concluded, but only within the context of a broader partnership.

And here again DiIulio seems to recognize the limits of viewing faith as decisive. As he told *The Boston Globe* in a 1998 interview: "We know from years of research that to the extent any of the big mentoring or job-training programs work, the one constant is meaningful adult involvement in the life of a child. Faith-based approaches tend to be very rich in human content.... [The minister's] first move isn't to hand out Bibles or pamphlets or proselytize. It's to put himself 24-7-365 into the lives of these young people." But, he cautioned, "we don't have data to prove that organic exposure to religious influence ... leads young people to a more positive outcome."



Research into faith-based approaches to drug and alcohol abuse—the issues about which advocates of Bush's initiative make their boldest claims—also suggests that faith per se is no panacea. As Republican Representative Rob Portman declared in endorsing Bush's faith-based plan, "[I]n the area of preventing drug abuse, studies show that faith-based drug treatment is generally much more effective than traditional treatment methods." Backers of faith-based initiatives often point to the widespread success of Alcoholics Anonymous, the famous twelve-step program that endorses a belief in a "power greater than ourselves" and in turning one's life "over to the care of God as we understand Him," as indicative of the transformative power of spirituality.

But, though AA has a high success rate among active, long-term members, research suggests that nearly half the initial attendees drop out after two months and nearly 90 percent leave within a year, once again complicating the relationship between correlation and causation. As with churches and crime reduction, it may well be the communal element of AA—a collection of individuals who have committed themselves to recovery—that is responsible for the group's success. A 1995 DePaul University study following 134 males throughout their participation in twelve-step programs like AA found that participants valued the programs' social support structure considerably more than its spiritual underpinning. As the professors conducting the study wrote in *The Journal of Substance Abuse*, "For most of these men (71%), attendance at weekly meetings was not motivated by 'spirituality' aspects of the program. In contrast, the major-

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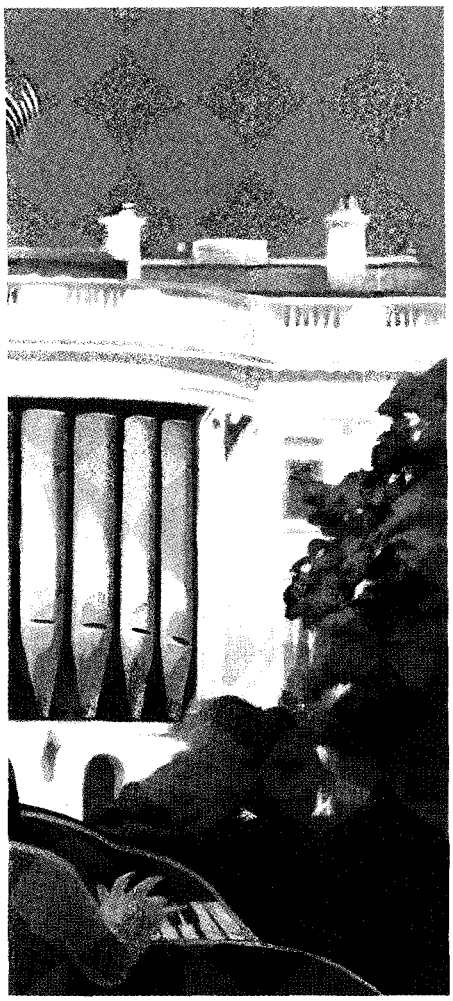

THOMAS FUCHS

ity of residents (53%) attending weekly AA meetings claimed that a sense of fellowship with similar recovering others was their reason for program involvement."

In fact, even proponents' claims that faith-based treatments for alcohol addiction are more successful than other treatments remain unsubstantiated. In December 1996, the National Institute on Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse completed Project Match, an eight-year survey of more than 1,600 alcoholics seeking various forms of treatment—one of the largest clinical trials ever conducted. The study concluded that there was no discernible difference in effectiveness between twelve-step treatments and secular alternatives such as behavioral or motivational enhancement therapy. Says Keith Humphreys, a professor of psychiatry at Stanford University Medical Center who specializes in twelve-step programs, "I haven't found anything in my studies—and I don't know anyone else who has, either—that says going to church or synagogue per se makes people less likely to use drugs and alcohol once they're dependent on them."

Of course, just because no one has quantified the power of faith to transform lives doesn't mean it's not real: The fact that evidence is anecdotal does not make it inconsequential. Bush himself has testified that he was saved from alcoholism through his faith, famously declaring Christ the thinker who has most influenced him "because he changed my heart." And researchers have made important observations about the value of recognizing one's powerlessness in overcoming addiction—an attitude that lends itself naturally to religious consciousness. Even modern medical research has begun to assimilate the idea of spiritual conversion into the scientific typology of recovery, which previously assumed the necessity of a prolonged rehabilitation process.

Still, in light of the inconclusive evidence, there are reasons to be cautious about religion's ability to address the nation's social problems. Given that much of the evidence suggests that community, not religion, is the critical factor in successful anti-poverty efforts, the administration's emphasis on faith may lead it not only to exaggerate the claims of religious groups but to ignore the achievements of secular ones. The purely secular Big Brothers/Big Sisters mentoring program, for instance, has been shown to reduce first-time drug use by one-half and youth violence by one-third. Yet purely secular organizations made up only five of the 34 groups Bush highlighted when he inaugurated the Office of Faith-Based Programs and Community Initiatives last week. When DiIulio was asked to head the office, he reportedly said he would refuse unless he was guaranteed that "faith" would come first in the title. Many conservatives applauded him for his integrity, with *The Weekly Standard* heralding his demand as "a smart decision." But, considering what DiIulio has admitted about the primacy of community in achieving social uplift, it wasn't a very smart, or honest, decision at all.

And even if you believe faith-based groups deserve more government support, there is a real danger that such support may come at the expense of secular and governmental alternatives. Just as many complained that the "thousand points of light" volunteerism of Bush's father was an excuse to cut social programs, the argument that churches are best suited to tend to the poor could gradually create a sense that social work is primarily the responsibility of the religious. Indeed, while Bush as governor spoke about "rallying the armies of compassion," his state ranked near last in per capita spending on social services. And, while Bush's conservative cronies malign unwieldy government bureaucracies, Texas's leadership role in advocating faith-based solutions doesn't compensate for the fact that the state ranks near the very bottom in its rates of child poverty and of children and adults without health insurance. As Patrick Bresette, associate director of the Austin think tank Center for Public Policy Priorities, points out, "Texas really doesn't spend much money on poor people and on social services and has really relied dramatically on federal funding or mandates from the federal government."

The abdication of social service provision to the religious is especially dangerous when one considers that most congregations are involved in merely short-term emergency remedies to poverty. Analyzing data from the 1998 national survey of American congregations, Arizona's Chaves determined that only 10 percent had programs directed at drug-abuse treatment, domestic-abuse counseling, assistance with obtaining health care, or job training.

Luckily, for the time being, at least, there is reason to believe that Americans accept secular models of service as readily as religious ones. According to a Pew Partnership for Civic Change survey released last week that asked respondents to rank organizations that could solve their communities' problems, local and community-based police departments ranked just as high as local religious institutions. Also ranked high were teachers, friends, and neighbors—all of whom, of course, have the power to change lives without recourse to the transcendent. As *The Washington Post*'s E. J. Dionne wrote recently, "The point has to be to strengthen the voluntary sector as a whole.... No society can depend on saints, even government-supported saints, to do it all by themselves." Amen. ■

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Stanley Kauffmann on Films

"Finish Your Symphony"

A FRENCH FILM about Beethoven that arrived here in 1937 contained one unforgettable scene. The composer is seated at a table covered with sheets of music manuscript. Behind his chair stands a lady friend. Beethoven becomes upset about something and starts to rise. The lady puts her hands on his shoulders and restrains him. "Sit down, Ludwig," she says soothingly. "Finish your symphony."

Not every film about an artist contains a comparable line, but the majority of such films tend in that direction—the reduction of an artist's life to the palpable. This reduction doesn't always mean resemblance to our own lives: more often, it means resemblance to previous films about artists. Such pictures have been made since the form was invented. Why? A film about an artist's life can reveal externals but very little about the making of his art. We can see him grab a brush or a pen or sit down at a piano and wham away, but what does that tell us about what he did? Flaubert, after consulting theater people, said, "The theater is not an art. It is a secret." (He never cracked that secret.) Anyone who had consulted Flaubert about the novel might have come away with a similar comment.

So, if every film about an artist's life has to be more concerned with the life than the art, why does that life attract us? Rembrandt or Van Gogh or Schumann or Browning? For two reasons, I'd say. First, a kind of resentment: we want to learn of elements in his life that are cognate with ours—schools, marriage, livelihood, and so on—the higher and the lower gossip that will make him one of us, keep him at our level, this person who has dared to captivate us. Second, sheer envy, not of talent as much as of wholeness: of an element that is much less cognate with most of our lives, heroism. To become first-class artists, these people needed moral courage beyond our own needs or possibilities. A distinguished writer once said to me, "There's no secret about being a great writer. It's simple. You just have to give your life." He didn't, and didn't become one for all his distinction; but he knew what was lacking.

Also important, and certainly not to be discounted in relation to films, there is the old mythology about artists—bohemianism, in all its velvet trappings. Yes, many a great artist led a sober regularized life—Bach, Verdi, Shaw, Hawthorne—probably the majority of the great ones; but there is always the sly hope in the public for Byron or Van Gogh or Toulouse-Lautrec. (Another film about the last-named is in the works, I hear.) And note how many latter-day biographers of artists feel they must supply previously omitted sexual details regardless of relevance. But even the most orthodox lives of artists are different at the core from other people's lives. Whenever the author I mentioned above was at a party and was asked what he did, he never said, "I write novels." He said, "Insurance." He knew that otherwise everyone in the room would look at him with a quite different geniality, would have different expectations, would make different sorts of jokes. In sum, then—in films, most certainly—the artist is only seemingly an ordinary member of our society. He (or, of course, she) follows other lights, obeys other signals, responds to other hungers than most of us do. There seems to me not a shred of romance in that statement. The trouble for films is that the artist's differences are only superficially dramatizable, and the real point of it all—the art itself—can only be glossed.

Pollock (Sony Pictures Classics), Ed Harris's film about the painter, is the absolute acme of all the attractions and all the difficulties inherent in this sort of work. Jackson Pollock had a life that seemed written by a skilled scenarist: years of obscurity and struggle, ten years or so of dazzling triumph, then a falling-off and a dramatic death (a car crash while drunk, which also killed one of the two young women who were with him). Further, the crowning touch for a film: the best of his art, which made him famous and wealthy, exemplifies moral heroism. He was rewarded for his persistence.

We meet Pollock in New York in the early 1940s at about the time he meets the painter Lee Krasner, who becomes not only his wife but his partner, supporter, and almost rote sparring partner. In these earlier years he is painting in a manner that is not totally different from a number of other contemporary painters. Then he and Krasner move to Long Island. One day, while he is preparing paints for a canvas, he accidentally drips a little on the floor. He stares at it. This is the worst moment in the film—the "Finish your symphony" moment. I almost saw a comic-strip lightbulb go off over Pollock's head. It was the epitome of what film can *not* do about an artist.

The huge drip paintings that are now virtually synonymous with his name are still subjects of critical controversy. (Clement Greenberg, a staunch advocate, said: "'Drip' is inaccurate; more correct would be 'pour and spatter.'") Pollock's opponents are easy to imagine: the admirers believe that Pollock altered the idea of easel painting, draftsmanship, the venerable line-versus-color discussion. He himself said: "I don't work from drawings or color sketches. My painting is direct.... I want to express my feelings rather than illustrate them."

The man's temperament and character were so fitting for the conventional unconventional Mad Artist that it is hard to believe that Pollock himself had no sense of performance. He did what he felt like doing—the tantrums, the binges, the offenses, the isolations—without any apparent trace of fakery or exhibitionism: still, he knew what he was doing and with his internal eye must have seen himself doing it. The most admirable aspect of his behavior—the only admirable aspect—is that he behaved this way before he was famous: it wasn't swollen ego that caused it, but a fierce solipsistic impatience with the mortal conditions that most of us accept.

That quality, plus the possibility that Pollock was objectively aware of his subjective behavior, is presumably what drew Harris to the idea of the film. It's hard to think that only a passion for Pollock's work would have attracted him, or the tempestuous life of an unimportant painter. Combine the reputation and the life, and an actor appears—an actor-director.

The taciturn menace, the conviction of intelligence and perception that Harris has shown previously serve him excellently here. To put it another way, his sincerity is never in doubt. His directing is up to what is needed. There are no scintillating touches; there are no slips.

The biggest difficulty for his directing is not the action but the talking, and

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not Pollock's. The screenplay by Barbara Turner and Susan J. Emshwiller includes a number of the people who figured in Pollock's life. So the film is laden with quick introductions of real persons who have to make some sort of impression. The most difficult instance is Clement Greenberg, who, while having a drink, has to pass judgments for the ages.

Lee Krasner, of course, is the most important other character, a difficult role, a punching bag who has yet to be very much of an individual in her own right, the person who is berated and abused and yet has to be something more than patient. Marcia Gay Harden plays Krasner, and her performance is sure to be underrated. She makes a being out of a woman whose husband treated her as part companion and part utensil.

Yet, creditable though *Pollock* is, it raises the old question again: why make a film about an artist? The only picture I can remember that brought me closer to an artist is François Girard's *Thirty-Two Short Films About Glenn Gould*, most of which was oblique and tangential. *Pollock*, for all its dedication, is just—yes, just—one more film about that perennially obdurate subject, an artist. ■

The danger of a world without enemies.

Lemkin's Word

By MICHAEL IGNATIEFF

WHEN CLAUDE LANZMANN was filming *Shoah*, he asked a Polish peasant whose fields abutted a death camp what he felt when he saw human ash from the crematoria chimneys raining down on his fields. The peasant replied: "When I cut my finger, I feel it. When you cut your finger, you feel it." The man's reply takes us to the heart of the problem of genocide. Why exactly is genocide a "crime against humanity"? Why is a crime committed against Jews or any other human group a crime against those who do not belong to that group?

The obvious answer seems obvious only if you assume what in fact requires demonstration, namely that we belong to the same species and owe each other the same duties of care. This concept came late to mankind, and to judge from the horrible century just past it is still struggling to make headway against the more evident idea that race, color, or creed mark impassible frontiers of moral concern. The Polish peasant was not implying that he had no feelings towards Jews. He was admitting only that he did not feel very much about them, and that his stronger feelings were reserved for people more like himself. To the extent that ethics follow feeling, his codes instructed him to care only for his own. In this, he reasoned as most human beings do.

Most moral principles take root within tribal boundaries and remain confined by the tribe's allegiances and interests. According to this conception of the ethical life, morality articulates identity and identity depends on difference. For millennia, human beings saw nothing odd about slavery, about selling and disposing of persons as if they were things. The Romans distinguished explicitly between war against civilized peoples, which had to obey certain rules of honor and mercy, and war against barbarians, which could be conducted without restraint of any kind. Moral universalism is a late and vulnerable addition to the vocabulary of mankind.

If all this is true, we need to force ourselves to think beyond the platitude that genocide is an abomination, and to understand the more difficult thought that it represents an unending moral temptation for mankind. The danger of genocide lies in its promise to create a world without enemies. Think of genocide as a crime in service of a utopia, a world without discord, enmity, suspicion, free of the enemy without or the enemy within. Once we understand that this utopia is the core of the genocidal intention, we have to realize that this utopia menaces us forever. Once we understand genocide as utopian, we understand also the vulnerability of universalism. The idea that there can be a "crime against humanity" is a counterintuitive one that has to make its way against the more alarming thought that what humans actually desire is not a world of brotherhood, but a world without enemies.

It will be said that moral universalism has an ancient pedigree, and that we can take comfort in how deeply the idea of the brotherhood of mankind runs in our religious and secular faiths. I am not so sure that we can derive such comfort from history. The moral world of the Old Testament is not only a universe of monotheistic universalism and prophetic justice; it is also a world of tribal moralities, of righteous slaughter rationalized by those who believed themselves chosen of God. The New Testament extends its new ideal of human equality only to the class of all believers. The precondition for Christian brotherhood is conversion.

Secular people, disgusted by the ingenious ways in which human beings have used religion to justify slaughter, may turn in relief to the secular universalism that we date to the Enlightenment. But as we now know, the Founding Fathers of the American civil religion did not see any contradiction between the universal claim that all men are created equal and the particularistic claim that slavery was merely a legitimate exercise of a constitutional right to property. It took the Civil War, the Fourteenth Amendment, and the repeal of Jim Crow for the most egalitarian society on earth even to begin to narrow the gulf between principle and practice. We cannot date effective legal universalism in the United States any earlier than 1964, and the passage of the Civil Rights Act.

ALL OF THIS is prologue to the thought that moral universalism is a modern conviction, established in our souls only after the most tenacious struggle to convince the powerful that they must practice what they preach. If we turn from the struggle to give equality a universalistic application to the struggle to establish the idea that the extermination of any group is a crime against all

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human groups, we discover again the modernity of moral universalism. To be sure, there are anticipations of the idea in the Roman conception of offenses against *jus gentium*, the law of all nations; but this is still a large conceptual step away from the idea of a common human race with equal rights and equal duties. The phrase "crime against humanity" enters the language of international law very late, only after World War I. The word "genocide" was not coined until 1943.

The man who coined it was Raphael Lemkin, a lawyer born in Bialystok in Poland a hundred years ago. Cast ashore in America by the Holocaust, and acting as a private citizen, without state support or salary, he single-handedly drafted and lobbied for the passage of the Genocide Convention, approved by the U.N. General Assembly in December 1948. This would be achievement enough, but Lemkin died alone and remains almost forgotten. The word that he coined—"genocide"—is now so banalized and misused that there is a serious risk that commemoration of his work will become an act of forgetting, obliterating what was so singular about his achievement.

To appreciate Lemkin's achievement, we must see it not as the ratification of easily available common sense, but as a counter-intuitive leap of the imagination beyond the realm of what common sense deemed possible. For the extraordinary fact is that Lemkin coined the word "genocide" before the reality it applied to had revealed itself in its demonically modern industrial form. Already in August 1941, Churchill had said, in the face of Nazi atrocities in Eastern Europe, that the world was faced with "a crime without a name." Yet when Lemkin coined the word, in 1943, while writing *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe* at Duke University, it was fully two years before the world knew the words Auschwitz, Buchenwald, Belsen, and Dachau.

By the middle of 1942, to be sure, prophetic figures such as Jan Karski and Szmul Zygielbojm had begged official Washington and London to grasp the reality of extermination in Poland. But those to whom they brought the news—Justice Felix Frankfurter, for example—could not bring themselves to believe what they were told. Isaiah Berlin was in the British Embassy in Washington from 1942 onwards, and was constantly in touch both with Frankfurter and with Nahum Goldman, Chaim Weizmann, and other key figures in the Zionist movement. None of them could believe that what was happening in Europe was more than a massive pogrom, a continuation of an immemorial pattern of persecution. What escaped them was the terrible novelty of industrialized mass slaughter sustained by an ideological desire to wipe a people from the face of the earth, to grind salt into the earth, as the Bible would say, so that nothing would ever grow again.

How are we to explain that Lemkin had the moral imagination these great figures lacked? It cannot be because he was privy to what they knew. He came to Washington in 1943, but he remained an isolated outsider and was not aware of the secret that insiders refused to believe. Instead he had to extrapolate, by a leap of the mind, from his own particular experience to the terrible general reality, the continental catastrophe that all but a handful refused to see. In 1939, he was in Warsaw, a lawyer in private practice, when the Germans invaded. He joined in the defense of the city and then fled eastwards. On the way, he hid with a Jewish baker and his family in a small town. He begged the family to flee and the family refused. Lemkin never forgot what the baker said to him: "We Jews are an eternal people, we cannot be destroyed. We can only suffer."

This noble adherence to an ancient truth almost certainly cost the baker and his family their lives. This very Jewish endurance was an essential element of that inability to see against which Lemkin was to struggle throughout the war. He fled to Sweden, leaving behind more than forty members of his own family. He set himself up in a Stockholm law library and began a study of the legal decrees of the New Order in Europe, using evidence that reached him through the neutralist Swedish embassies, the Red Cross delegations in Germany, and German occupation radio.

Nobody before Lemkin had studied the German occupation from the standpoint of jurisprudence. His central insight was that the occupation, not just in Poland but all across Europe, had inverted the equality provisions of all the European legal traditions. Food in Poland was distributed on racial grounds, with Jews getting the least. Marriage in occupied Holland was organized entirely on racial lines: Germans responsible for getting Dutch women pregnant were not punished, as would be the case under normal military law; they were rewarded, because the resulting child would be a net addition to the Nordic race.

Lemkin was the first scholar to work out the logic of this jurisprudence. From its unremitting racial bias, he was able to understand, earlier than most, that the wholesale extermination of groups was not an accidental or incidental cruelty, nor an act of revenge. It was the very essence of the occupation. Lemkin published his findings, with the help of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, in 1944, in *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*. This book is a rare example of scholarship as heroism: a patient, detailed, unprecedented, and unflagging demonstration, decree by decree, of modern despotism's infernal logic.

As Lemkin slowly worked out where this logic was headed, he was just as concerned about the fate of the Polish people as he was about the fate of his fellow Jews. In the decrees penalizing the use of the Polish language and promoting the destruction of Polish cultural monuments and treasures, the use of Poles for slave labor, the merciless repression of all resistance, and the settlement of Germans on Polish land—in all those awful edicts Lemkin could make out a concerted desire to subjugate, and if necessary to exterminate, the Polish people. The concept of genocide was invented, in other words, not only to describe the fate of his own people, but also to capture what was happening to the people to whom he would have belonged, had he been permitted. He was one of those Polish patriots never allowed membership in the nation that he claimed as his own. Lemkin's theoretical innovation taught a universalist lesson not least by example.

In understanding why he had such unique premonitory capacity, such a special gift for anticipating horror, we should remember that Lemkin was born and raised in a place where it was a matter of life and death for a Jew to anticipate the worst. Born on a farm near Bialystok, when Poland still belonged to the Russian czar, he remembered how his father had to bribe the local constable to turn a blind eye to the fact that the family owned a farm, a violation of Pale legislation against the Jews. He was twelve years old when Mendel Beilis was put on trial for ritual murder, and the family lived in fear until Beilis was released. In World War I, the Germans and Russians fought over the family's farm, and it was destroyed. After the war, when Trotsky and Lenin fought Pilsudski, Lemkin did service in Pilsudski's army. Later he trained as a lawyer and helped to draft the criminal code of a newly independent Poland. He served as a state prosecutor in Warsaw until anti-Semitic slurs forced him to withdraw into private practice in the 1930s.

Never secure in the Poland of his birth, he sought belonging in the law. He was not the only Jew from Bialystok to do so. Hersh Lauterpacht, later the Whewell Professor of Jurisprudence at Cambridge, was also from Bialystok, and made his escape to England in the 1920s. Like Lemkin, he became an international lawyer; and like Lemkin, he devoted his war work

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as a scholar to devising legal responses to barbarism. In Lauterpacht's case, it was by drafting an international bill of rights that influenced both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 and, more directly, the European Convention on Human Rights of 1950. Both men responded to barbarism in the same way: by seeking to draft international legal instruments that would ban it. In a deeper sense, both these men found a home in the law, and their passionate attachment to international law was a consequence of their homelessness anywhere else.

This ideal of a world made civilized by international convention drove Lemkin first to define genocide as a crime in international law, then to secure its inclusion in the Nuremberg indictments in 1945, and finally to secure a convention making the crime a matter of universal criminal jurisdiction in 1948. When it was finally passed by the General Assembly in 1948, he was discovered weeping in a corridor of the United Nations. He wanted to be left alone, and in every sense he was alone. All of his family, except one brother, had perished in the Holocaust.

Lemkin's faith in international law was not universally shared. The surviving Jews of Poland put no trust in a world made safe by international covenants against genocide. For them, safety and home lay where Herzl, Weizmann, and Ben-Gurion said it lay: in a defensible nation-state of their own. But Lemkin never identified with the promise of Zion. In an article written in April 1945, he rather poignantly identified himself as "Polish but his viewpoint is international." There is pathos in this internationalism, since internationalism had always betrayed him. He had believed in the League of Nations, and he had presented his first legal ideas to outlaw barbarism and vandalism to League of Nations experts in 1933, only to find himself laughed at by the German delegations.

Yet he was one of those rare people who take scorn as proof that they are right. Lemkin never deviated from the conviction that only a just international legal order could protect his own people. Zionism, a Jewish homeland, was a distraction. He never stopped to consider that a defensible homeland is a more reliable remedy for genocide than any U.N. convention. In his way, he too was a utopian. The young journalist A.M. Rosenthal of *The New York Times* once challenged Lemkin to explain how a legal document, a "scrap of paper" could stop a Hitler or a Stalin. Lemkin replied: "Only man has law. Law must be built, do you understand me? You must build the law." Alas, his faith in law was not only powerful, it was also poignant: the Genocide Convention Lemkin labored so hard to draft and to have ratified has secured only one conviction in its fifty-year existence.

He was also a prisoner of his past in his strange scorn for human rights. As Samantha Power shows in a forthcoming study of the history of the Genocide Convention, Lemkin was contemptuous of the work of Eleanor Roosevelt and the drafters of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which secured General Assembly approval within days of the vote on his Genocide Convention. Mere declarations, he believed, were meaningless. What was needed was a binding convention, with universally enforceable powers.

But here, too, history has been ironic. Human rights have gone on to become the faith of a faithless age, while the Genocide Convention has been honored only in the breach. Against all of Lemkin's expectations, conventions have proved less influential than declarations. Indeed, his own convention has had perverse effects. During the genocide in Rwanda, State Department spokesmen refused to use the word "genocide" to describe it, lest it entrain the very responsibilities that Lemkin had written into the convention.

Those who should use the word "genocide" never let it slip their mouths, and those who do use the word "genocide" banalize it into a validation of every kind of victimhood. Thus slavery is called genocide, when—whatever else it was—it was a system to exploit the living rather than to exterminate them. Aboriginal peoples in North America speak of a microbial genocide, when it should be evident that microbes do not have intentions. Genocide has no meaning unless the crime can be connected to a clear intention to exterminate a human group in whole or in part. Something more than rhetorical exaggeration for effect is at stake here. Calling every abuse or crime a genocide makes it steadily more difficult to rouse people to action when a genuine genocide is taking place.

TOWARDS THE END of his life, with his convention a dead letter and its ratification by the United States stalled in the Senate, Lemkin wrote mournfully that there had been three things he had wanted to avoid in his life: wearing eyeglasses, losing his hair, and ending up as a refugee. All three, he said ruefully, had taken place. He died alone and forgotten in a Manhattan hotel in 1959.

Was he a failure? I do not believe so. The achievement that cannot be taken away from Lemkin is the intelligence and the courage to have identified an abominable new intention when others saw only immemorial cruelty, and to have given this new intention—to live in a world without enemies—the name that it deserves. It must be said, too, that it was Lemkin who gave meaning to what has to be the central concept in the postwar moral imagination: the idea of a crime against humanity.

Yet we cannot share the meaning that Lemkin gave to his concept. For if you were to ask Lemkin the question that I posed at the outset—why is a crime against Jews also a crime against Gentiles?—he would have replied that what human beings share is a common civilization, in which the achievements of one group are shared by all. Thus in a passage written in April 1945, at the very moment that the world was discovering what lay behind the barbed wire at Auschwitz and Belsen, he continued to write:

> Our whole heritage is a product of the contributions of all peoples. We can best understand this when we realize how impoverished our culture would be if the so-called inferior peoples doomed by Germany, such as the Jews, had not been permitted to create the Bible, or to give birth to an Einstein, a Spinoza; if the Poles had not had the opportunity to give to the world a Copernicus, a Chopin, a Curie; the Czechs, a Huss, a Dvorak; the Greeks, a Plato and a Socrates; the Russians, a Tolstoy and a Shostakovich.

There is something affecting—and also something wrong—about this idea that what humanity holds in common is civilization. *Kultur* did not prevent Germans from massacring even their fellow citizens. Indeed, *Kultur* was Germanized in such a way as to deny Jews any right to belong to the civilization that they had made in common with Gentiles. Lemkin remained trapped by the hopeful optimism of a civilization in twilight, just as he was trapped by the illusion that what was Western was universal. But when Tutsis start massacring Hutus, when Khmers start killing fellow Cambodians, what shared civilization is supposed to mobilize Europeans to intervene?

This perplexity returns us to the Polish peasant and the mysterious question of why the fate of one group should concern the fate of another. What can we say that is truthful enough to acknowledge the ineluctable difference between human beings that saved Polish peasants from extermination and condemned their fellow beings to infamous death? What we can say—what Lemkin did not say—is that it is not civilization we share, but those very differences.

What it means to be a human being, what defines the very identity we share as a species, is the fact that we are differentiated by race, religion, ethnicity, and individual difference. These differentiations

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define our identity both as individuals and as a species. No other species differentiates itself in this individualized abundance. A sense of otherness, of distinctness, is the very basis of the consciousness of our individuality, and this consciousness, based in difference, is a constitutive element of what it is to be a human being. To attack any one of these differences—to round up women because they are women, Jews because they are Jews, whites because they are whites, blacks because they are blacks, gays because they are gay—is to attack the shared element that makes us what we are as a species. In this way of thinking, we understand humanity, our common flesh and blood, as valuable to the degree that it allows us to elaborate the dignity and the honor that we give to our differences—and that this reality of difference, both fated and created, is our common inheritance, the shared integument that we must fight to defend whenever any of us is attacked for manifesting it. ■

Writing Under God

By JAMES WOOD

Monsieur Ouine
by Georges Bernanos
translated and with an introduction
by William S. Bush

(University of Nebraska, 256 pp., $20)

I.

THERE ARE GOOD reasons to be suspicious of "religious" novelists. Or, to put it another way, there are good reasons to consider the novel a secular form. Narrative corrugates dogma, puts truths in motion. Most novels seem to have awkward endings—the deathbed evaporations, the rushed last pages, the neat basket of tied ends—because the reader has been tutored in prolongation by a story that seems like life precisely in its continuousness. Narrative's continuousness—this happened and then that happened and then this happened, for these reasons—is secular rather than religious, because it is endless in the way life is, rather than eternal in the way religion promises.

Like life, narrative only seems endless; it is bottomless rather than circular. But eternity, religious eternity, stops time by expanding it into infinity, and making a circularity of it: time will come to an end, we are doctrinally instructed, when the apocalypse comes. Religion works to arrest narrative. In place of narrative's bottomlessness, religion poses the parable—a story that answers in advance the questions that it raises. Its interest is not in what people multiply are, but in what they singly should be. Religion corrects those who deserve it, while the novel hands down sympathy for those who do not deserve it. Camus once expressed the hope that his fiction would "try to do what Christianity never did: to take care of the damned." Drama needs the dialogical in order to exist, whereas one feels that religion becomes drama only when humans insist on talking back. Coleridge argued that Job proved that the Bible must have been written by humans, because God would never have made such a powerful argument against Himself.

For all these reasons—and because the novel is really a late modern form—it is very hard to find many major novelists who were orthodox believers. The Russian novel, which is God-intoxicated, proves the case by its very mutations: Gogol was unable to complete the second, religiously dogmatic part of *Dead Souls*, and burned it. Tolstoy, while developing his unorthodox Christianity, renounced his own great novels. And Dostoevsky, the most fiercely believing novelist, wrote novels whose self-argumentative power is so great that by their end one is almost nostalgic for the orthodoxy that has been so systematically annihilated.

The French writer Georges Bernanos, who is sometimes compared to Dostoevsky, was a religious novelist. More specifically, he was a Catholic novelist. Artistically, he is sometimes as limited as this term suggests, and when he is powerful it is because he is being more of a novelist than a Catholic, or more of a religious individualist than a Catholic. (Dare one say it, the more Protestant he becomes, the more powerful he becomes as a writer.) He is best known in English as the author of *The Diary of a Country Priest* (1936), a book whose great beauty and scathing power belie the watercolor tints of its title, and which was used by Robert Bresson for his great film of the same name. Very little of the rest of his work is available in English translation.

Monsieur Ouine is Bernanos's last novel; it appeared in 1943, five years before his death. But he started writing it in the early 1930s, and had almost finished the book when he abandoned it and immediately began work on *The Diary of a Country Priest*. The two novels are connected in theme, too: both are about the passage of evil in a French rural parish, and both are concerned with Christianity's mission in a century of indifference and horror.

But Bernanos's most famous book is a great novel, while *Monsieur Ouine* is a very bad one. Indeed, the two books mark the extremities, positive and negative, of his achievement. *Monsieur Ouine* is incoherent, melodramatic, bullyingly allegorical, and written in a prose that, when it is not actually incomprehensible, weeps the glass tears of sentimental genre-fiction. William S. Bush, the book's brave and supple new translator, tells us that Bernanos sometimes called it his "great book"; he omits to mention that during his long struggles with it, Bernanos also called it his "dismal urinal." Its sheer murkiness perhaps explains the fact that both the original French edition and the first English translation (it was made in 1945) were error-crowded, and in places missing entire paragraphs and pages of Bernanos's manuscript. Bush has produced the first English version of the authoritative French text that was published in 1955.

NABOKOV COMPLAINED THAT Turgenev essentially moved characters around in order for them to have conversations; and Bernanos moves them around in order for them to confess to each other. These confessions, which involve long speeches, sometimes of many pages, are extraordinarily affecting and frequently beautiful. Bernanos is, like Dostoevsky, something of a sensationalist of the soul. While Dostoevsky's characters speak to each other in the same kind of mashed and ripely careless prose in which Dostoevsky writes, Bernanos's priests and parishioners speak a formal and poetic discourse, full of metaphor and figure.

They are domestic rhetors, and very French ones—Diderot's symmetrical conversationalists come to mind—who use an ordered vivacity of language to advance an argument. The reader forgives the implausibility of their voices, and treats these long speeches as a species of verse drama.

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In *The Diary of a Country Priest*, for instance, M. le Curé de Torcy, the character closest to Bernanos's way of thinking, delivers a speech about the hard challenges of Christian truth:

> No, St. Paul wasn't kidding himself. He simply knew Christianity had let loose a truth in the word that nothing would ever stop again because it was already there, right down in the depths of human consciousness, and man had instantly seen himself mirrored in it; God saved each one of us and each one of us is worth the blood of Our Lord. You can translate that any way you like, even into rationalism—the silliest talk of the lot—it makes you shove your words together that fuse when they touch. Let future society try and sit on that lot! Her behind'll catch fire, that's all.

M. le Curé de Torcy is a heavyset, truth-telling, blunt-spoken man, a thumping rebel. He is the kind of priest who, burning on the margins of the church, possesses that natural anti-clericalism that paradoxically only makes him a better example of, and argument for, the priesthood. He comes to the aid of the novel's narrator, who is the priest of the diary's title, a sickly, agonizingly humble and naïve young man, who has been recently appointed to a sluggish and subsequently sinful parish. De Torcy sees a spirit of real Christianity in the young priest's pious simplicity, and in a series of long dialogues he strives to goad his interlocutor into robustness.

Georges Bernanos by Jack Coughlin for The New Republic

De Torcy prays every day for Martin Luther, he tells the novel's narrator, and his own first name is Martin. Bernanos, who displayed a strong element of Protestant non-conformism, was always deeply attached to this ideal of the priest: the uncontrollable flame that burns through its own holder. He never stopped denouncing its rarity in the Catholic church. De Torcy says that God's word is not comforting, but is "a red-hot iron. And you who preach it would go picking it up with a pair of tongs, for fear of burning yourself, you daren't get hold of it with both hands." He sides with the poor, and thinks that this is the Christian's proper partisanship:

> Poverty weighs heavily in the scales of My Heavenly Father, and all your hoarded smoke won't redress the balance. The poor you have always with you, just because there will always be might, that is to say there will always be hard and grasping men out for power more than possession. These men exist as much among the poor as among the rich, and the scallywag vomiting up his drink in the gutter is perhaps drunk with the very same dreams as Caesar asleep under his purple canopy. Rich and poor alike, you'd do better to look at yourself in the mirror of want, for poverty is the image of your own fundamental illusion.

Eloquent as these addresses are, they are held together by tissues of extremism and cliché, which is common to all of Bernanos's novels. As in Koestler's fiction, and in Camus's too, Bernanos's long exhortations are interrupted by feeble novelistic conventions: "He continued to puff on his now dwindling cigarette"; "Outside the rain was coming down at full force." In *The Diary of a Country Priest*, Bernanos even dares a variant of that filmic platitude, the angry hand slowly crushing the wineglass: "Her hand closed round an ancient fan lying there with other ornaments, and I watched the tortoise-shell handle slowly cracking between her fingers." As the hero of *Darkness at Noon* is visited throughout by a nagging toothache, so the young priest of *The Diary of a Country Priest* mentions every so often an ominous stomach pain, which (the reader is unsurprised to learn) eventually kills him. In general, the only kind of plot used by Bernanos involves death, murder, and suicide. He is almost vampirically keen to do away with his characters. In *The Diary of a Country Priest*, the parish's local doctor commits suicide, the lady of the local château dies suddenly of a weak heart, and the young priest dies of stomach cancer, while staying with his old friend from the seminary, an apostate who is himself dying of tuberculosis.

Yet *Monsieur Ouine* makes the earlier novel seem calm. The merest recital of its story-slalom conveys the book's flickering and unstable atmosphere. A troubled and fatherless fourteen-year-old boy, nicknamed Steeny, runs away from home, where his high-strung mother, it is hinted, may be having a lesbian affair with an English lodger. Mysteriously, he finds refuge in the village's château. There he is told by the master of the house that his father is not dead, as the boy had thought. The trauma of the news throws him into the arms of Monsieur Ouine, a retired professor of modern languages who, for inexplicable reasons, has been living in the château, and who has attained a Svengali-like power over the house's master and mistress. Ouine is pure evil, a repulsive, sweating, fat-breasted pederast. In some obscure way, he is the source of the parish's many troubles. He seduces Steeny, who also falls under his sway. Meanwhile, a boy in the village is murdered, the local mayor is going mad, and the mistress of the château, an aristocratic slattern, is killed by an enraged mob at the boy's funeral. The novel ends, of course, with the death of Monsieur Ouine.

In his useful introduction, William S. Bush wriggles chivalrously around this strange and incomprehensible book. It is, he says, a "high allegory" of the moral decline of Europe in the 1930s. It is written in a "poetic prose" that becomes "almost hallucinatory." "His real goal was symbolic," Bush writes; "the murder of an innocent child serves as a symbol of the slaughter of innocents in World War I." The novel

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is "prophetic," but it is also "this dark, chaotic book." In truth, the book is almost unbearably uncontrolled, finished at a time of great personal grief and strain in Bernanos's life—the early years of World War II—when its author was so preoccupied with his work as a polemicist and pamphleteer that he did not even read the novel's proofs.

It is difficult to disinter even a few threads of sense from the mounds of slack. Prose such as this, found on every page, further clogs the inspection: "His voice had lost some of its burlesque assurance while his hands, placed flat on his knees, traced the gesture of a bird catcher, a sort of timid, enveloping caress. And it was toward those hands that she irresistibly lowered her proud gaze, with the immense, inexorable patience of a trapped animal." Or this: "An expression not so much of insolence or cheekiness but of a secret, deep timidity, isolating him from other men, making of him a ferocious, cunning hunter of hares and whores."

INSOFAR AS ONE can assemble the themes of this novel, they appear as exaggerated versions of arguments made earlier and with much greater delicacy in *The Diary of a Country Priest*: the mysteriousness of evil, the secular menace of the modern world and religion's duty to oppose it. Bush tells us that Ouine's name is an amalgam of *oui* and *non*, and is an attempt to symbolize the professor's inability to distinguish yes from no, right from wrong. The character Monsieur Ouine is thought to have been partly modeled on André Gide, whom Bernanos admired as a stylist and detested as a thinker. Bernanos spent his entire life inveighing, often with superb fire and polemical ingenuity, against selected atheists, democrats, communists, and modern nihilists—not to mention mediocre Catholic priests and Marshal Pétain. He once wrote of the anti-religious Anatole France: "No, I don't hate him any longer. I should only like to borrow from the Gospel its most mysterious malediction and apply it to him: it were a good thing if this man had never been born." In 1926, he turned Anatole France into the loathsome writer Antoine Saint-Marin in his first novel, *The Star of Satan*.

But in *Monsieur Ouine* all this is alternately too obscure and too obvious. There is no principle of narrative delicacy, of subtle dialogism at work. Ouine is simply a hateful devil-figure, and the parish is beyond redemption. By contrast, what makes *The Diary of a Country Priest* so beautiful is that Bernanos grounds similar discussions in the experience of the young priest, who lives them not as arguments or "allegories" but as anxieties, and thus as dramas. The young priest feels his own faith to be insecure at times, and struggles to pray to his Lord. His piety and his simplicity are so great that he unwittingly enrages and confuses his parishioners, who exploit him and entangle him in their own worldly bemusements. He is a milder version of Dostoevsky's idiot, Prince Myshkin, a man whose Christ-like goodness is too good for this world, and spreads evil in its wake. Thus goodness actually creates evil—a satanic paradox hangs off this. (Bernanos liked to say that if Christ returned, the cardinals would crucify him again, as they burned his beloved Jeanne d'Arc.) He feels himself to be a failure, as a priest and as a Christian. He lacks M. le Curé de Torcy's vigorous powers of ministry.

THE YOUNG PRIEST is awkwardly suspended between a holiness that judges all human action under an impossibly demanding religious eye, and a charity that forgives all and sees "only the concrete instance." Yet, as he admits to his diary, "no priest worthy of the name sees only the concrete instance"—there must always be the higher theological category. At one moving moment in the book, he rebukes the daughter of the mistress of the château for hating her mother. "Who are you to condemn another's sin?" he asks her, and then continues, "He who condemns sin becomes part of it, espouses it." Though Bernanos does not mention it, the priest echoes a striking passage in Augustine's commentary on Paul's Letter to the Galatians, in which Augustine similarly warns against censoriousness: "It were best, while watering the dust with your tears, to remember that we have no right to crow over another's sin, since we sin in the very reproach of sin if anger is better at making us sinners than mercy is at making us kind."

But Bernanos realizes the dangers of self-negation in this position. If he who condemns sin also ends up always espousing it, then there is no righteousness and no priesthood. This is what the young priest begins to understand as he moves towards death. His last words are: "Grace is ... everywhere"; and grace is everywhere just because sin is everywhere and all are sinners. But then what are priests, and who will preach to the priests? The young curé is in some ways moving between a religious mission and a novelistic mission, between seeing "only the concrete instance" and turning away from it to God. His deathbed words represent a wonderful fusion of the novelistic task—to sympathize with all types of humans, to see only their concrete instances—and the religious task—to see "grace" in all types of humans, to see only their theological instances. The book derives its great power from this movement between the novelistic and the theological, the heuristic and the hortatory, the diurnal and the deistic. It is precisely this narrative tide that *Monsieur Ouine* freezes into allegory and symbolism.

II.

GEORGES BERNANOS WAS born in 1888 in Paris, but his imagination was nourished by the countryside of Artois, in the Pas-de-Calais region of France, where his family had a country house. His upbringing was comfortable, conservative, highly orthodox. The little boy was dreamy, religiose, and royalist; he identified with a lost France of Charlemagne and Jeanne d'Arc. As a teenager, he began to contribute short stories to an illustrated royalist review called *Le Panache*.

To dream of a monarchy, to be a Catholic anti-democrat in the France of the 1910s, meant a commitment to a certain idea of *la patrie* as a Christian fatherland. Robert Speaight, the author of a fine study of Bernanos, writes that "to the end of his days he found it difficult to admit the innocence of Dreyfus; all he would concede was the injustice of condemning him for political reasons." Bernanos inevitably found himself drawn towards Charles Maurras's L'Action Française, and, for a few years at least, happily persecuted in print their enemies: Protestants, atheists, Jews, Freemasons, secularists, and all those thought to threaten the "Catholic order" of France. And not just in print: the young Bernanos was part of a crowd that chased off the podium and then thrashed a lecturer who had insulted the blessed memory of Jeanne d'Arc.

But Bernanos's Catholicism was, in the end, far too strange and pure for him to remain within any political grouping. He broke with Maurras, whose intense sympathy for Catholicism did not extend as far as Catholic belief, and in later years fiercely denounced him: "For us, the France of Maurras is as empty and hollow as his Catholicism without Christ, his Catholic 'order' without grace. This is not the country that we honour; this is not the France of Chartres." A phrase such as "the France of Chartres" makes Bernanos's Catholicism sound pompous and gestural when it was solemn and unrelenting. His Christianity was an annihilating and self-annihilating devotion to God and Church not so unlike the unworldly piety of the young curé in *The Diary of a Country Priest*. Its fierce paradoxical power—and finally its political contradiction—had to do with the impossibility of "the France of Chartres" ever actually existing or being realized for one who could so earnestly utter the phrase.

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The France of Chartres, as far as Bernanos was concerned, would have been a France of saints and martyrs and, inescapably, sinners. But not priests and not politicians. Bernanos thought that modern France was, as he put it, "on the road to destruction." Around him he saw the aftereffects of World War I, the rise of socialism and Christian democracy (that phrase repelled him), modernism in the Church, nihilism among intellectuals, and acquiescence among priests. "To what depths of meanness and servility do the ecclesiastics want to reduce us?" he wrote in 1926. "I am ashamed of them, I am ashamed of myself, I am ashamed of our own helplessness as Catholics."

YEARS LATER, AS World War II approached, he would magnificently attack those priests who had done nothing to resist the spreading fascism: "one of these astute little Monsignori diplomats ... with his fat fingers and cunning smile.... You may persuade me to tolerate the existence of these intermediaries for the sake of the Church's temporal needs, but you would not dare forbid me to look forward to the day when they will have become useless parasites, easy to dispense with." For Bernanos, the church was a communion of saints, not a curia of priests. In 1929, in an essay on Jeanne d'Arc, he wrote:

> To become a saint, what bishop would not give his mitre, his ring, and his pectoral cross, what cardinal would not sacrifice his purple and what pontiff his white robe, his chamberlain, his Swiss guards, and all his temporal appurtenance?... For sanctity is an adventure; it is even the only adventure. Once you have understood this, you have entered into the heart of the Catholic faith.... Not one of us will ever know enough theology to become a canon. But we know enough to become a saint. Others can look after the spiritual side of things; others can argue and legislate; but we hold in our hands the temporal kingdom of God. Ours is the inheritance of the saints.

"Sanctity is an adventure; it is even the only adventure": clearly, this almost chiliastic fervor, with its extraordinary blend of Protestant anti-clericalism ("others can look after the spiritual side of things") and Catholic piety, its determination to speak on behalf of the people—this kind of theology would inevitably find itself unhoused, politically and institutionally.

There is a sense in which Bernanos, following to the end the logic of a Christianity in which all are sinners and "everywhere is grace," could not really have defended any church, let alone the great worldly Vatican, with its monsignors flitting from room to room like God's whims. Thus, he writes, "I am ashamed of them [the ecclesiastics], I am ashamed of myself," and becomes for a moment one of the priests he is attacking. "He who condemns sin becomes part of it," says Bernanos's fictional priest. But he who refrains from condemning sin also becomes part of it. Bernanos often sounds like a combination of the young curé of his great novel and the fiercer M. le Curé de Torcy, at once humble and proud, abashed and robust, believing in the Church in one breath and forced logically in the next to define the Church as, in effect, a communion of sinners, or of martyrs, but not of priests.

Bernanos's religious humility is what separates him from T. S. Eliot, who was born in the same year, and was also influenced by Maurras, and also defended orthodoxy against the mistrals of the moment, those temporal winds that knocked against Christianity. Eliot talks about the sin of pride a great deal, but one never really believes him. His orthodoxy is certainly rigid, but it is also utterly cheerless. And it is, of course, an entirely housed orthodoxy, roofed by the Anglican establishment.

But Bernanos is passionate where Eliot is bloodless, and self-annihilating where Eliot is only self-invigilating. Bernanos was ashamed of his church, and because it was his church he was ashamed of himself. And he understood, and implicitly explored in *The Diary of a Country Priest*, the stubborn dialectic of humility: as long as a self is alive, it is not humble enough, for humility is the erasure of the self; yet one needs a self on which to practice humility; yet as soon as one has a self, one is again not humble enough. In other words, humility needs the very pride it chastens, and thus humility may very well not be humble at all, but proud. Humility demands negation, sainthood, martyrdom, and finally the self-abolition of the Church.

JUST AS BERNANOS was his church, he was France, and so he was ashamed of France, too. In 1938, he went into "voluntary exile" in Brazil. From there, with a photograph of Churchill pinned above his desk, he produced an enormous amount of polemical journalism. He was disgusted by Munich, disgusted by the French surrender in 1940, disgusted by Vichy and by Pétain, "a vain and sententious old man, in whom a fierce ambition had become an unmentionable vice with advancing years, kindling a sort of lubricious spark in his speeches where the unction of a shady solicitor was strangely combined with that of a priest

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no better than he should be." He writes movingly of how, in Brazil, thousands depended on France, on the idea of France, in these terrible years, and France let them down.

When de Gaulle returned to a liberated France, he invited Bernanos (along with Maritain and Teilhard de Chardin) to return with him. Characteristically, Bernanos alienated those in the Resistance whom he had supported during the war years. For Bernanos considered the France that was growing out of the aftermath of the war to be morally windswept. He bitterly attacked the communists and the left in general for promoting an idea of man that was thoroughly irreligious. But he refused to support democracy. He argued that the war had not been a struggle between democracy and dictatorship, but between two kinds of dictatorship, a political one and an economic one. And now, once the war was over, Europe was choosing between a communist dictatorship (political) and a capitalist dictatorship (economic).

In two lectures that he delivered in 1947, Bernanos argued that the idea of France had meant, for many millions, freedom of thought, the domain of universal reason, and a conception of man as free: "There are millions in the world who have not read and never will read M. Sartre who have ever before them the same image of France our ancestors had." This idea had been destroyed in 1940, and was being destroyed again by a new technological order, the order that had invented the atomic bomb and the free market, and now the idea of a European market. Times were coming, he warned, when the only law would be an economic one, a time "without pity for the weak, since the only law will be that of efficiency." The threat that hangs over Europe "is the threat of a worldwide totalitarian and highly centralized concentration of power which, sooner or later . . . would make of free man a kind of monster." Democracy was not the answer, since democracy always chose egalitarianism over freedom. The entire planet was going to become "an immense piece of machinery and man a sort of industrious insect."

THIS CONCEPTION OF industrious man, said Bernanos, was born in England, in the Industrial Revolution, but it was by no means inevitable in France, a country that had never been very good at this kind of industry. Indeed, it was only France, and the idea of France, that could passionately oppose it and annul it. It was, in many ways, a classic chauvinist French argument, made wild by its tinctures of Romantic organicism and anti-industrialism—Ruskin at the Sorbonne rather than Oxford.

The contradictions and the weaknesses of Bernanos's analysis are obvious enough. The determination to make economic dictatorship equivalent to political dictatorship is morally sloppy, and is achieved only by speaking figuratively rather than practically of the economic "dictatorship." And this equation, after a war between democracy and dictatorship in which Bernanos himself had taken a side, and the right side, was incoherent. Moreover, the vagueness of the analysis, combined with its dogmatism, is exactly the contradiction represented by a theology trying to be a politics. When one searches for what Bernanos would oppose to democracy—or to the hated communism, for that matter—one finds nothing more precise than "the worldwide mobilization of all spiritual forces." The complete absence of any mention of the Holocaust, and the failure to see this, rather than the "new technological order," as "the crisis of European civilization," is rather shocking. And the chauvinism whereby World War II becomes essentially a referendum on the fate of French culture is absurd—a chauvinism uncomfortably close to the nationalism that had produced that very war, and a nationalism that Bernanos had always laudably detested.

One is struck by the narrowness of Bernanos's conception of France—"the France of Chartres"—and the contradiction of an argument for French "reason" and French freedom issuing from a Catholic, from a man who, despite his heterodoxy, would have certainly submitted to any papal decree. And yet there is something moving in the prospect of Bernanos's passionate rejectionism. Again he was unhoused, attacked by his disappointed former allies, shunned by de Gaulle (who had presciently feared exactly this), denounced by the leftist clergy whom he had excoriated, and doubtless ignored by "M. Sartre."

In the era of *Being and Nothingness*, it was courageous to dwell so publicly in the Absolute. In *Nausea*, which appeared two years after *The Diary of a Country Priest*, Sartre had explored the contingency of reality: "Existence is not necessary . . . reality is gratuitous," says Roquentin, the novel's hero. Bernanos's priest has something of the same urge towards self-cancellation, but he sees himself sick with God: "How easy it is to hate oneself!" he says, as if in reply to the suicidal Roquentin. "True grace is to forget. Yet if pride could die in us, the supreme grace would be to love oneself in all simplicity. . . ." In the same passage, he speaks of a woman's "innocent rebellion"—and this is true also of the rebellion of Bernanos, a Catholic without a church and a Frenchman without a country, because he believed too strongly in them. He loved them to extinction. And his rebellion had the humility of pride. ■

The Normality Blues

By ROBERT BOYERS

Eduard's Homecoming by Peter Schneider translated by John Brownjohn

(Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 352 pp., $25)

I.

IS THERE NOTHING so grim that it cannot be turned to comedy? Twentieth-century German history would seem to provide a test case. The land of war criminals and skinheads, of festering guilt and revisionist denial, of blood sausage and blood libel, has inspired plenty of farce and satire, but most serious German writers in the twentieth century have opted for the lugubrious or the solemnly admonitory, for the rueful or for an especially vengeful species of black humor. To be sure, Günter Grass long ago demonstrated, with an assurance bordering on megalomania, that a German writer might make anything he likes of the German century, that it would yield as readily to divertissement as to tragedy, to every kind of exorbitance as to anguish; but the one thing that has seemed more or less out of reach for German writers is the comedy of ordinary life.

Ordinariness has often seemed problematic for German writers. In Grass the

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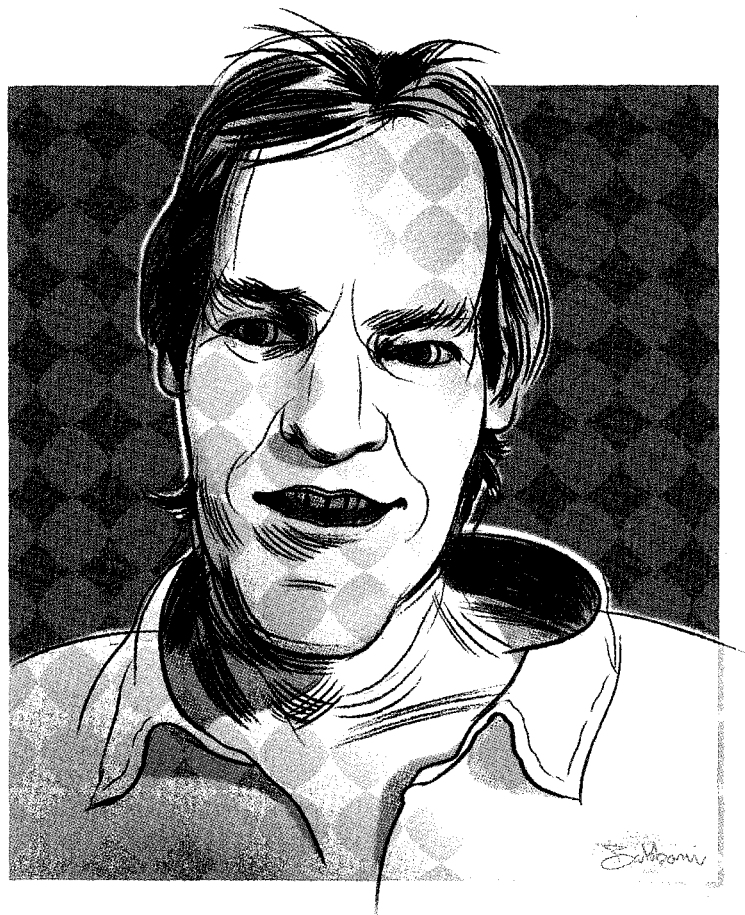
ordinary is typically associated with kitsch or with "the bourgeois smug," with a comforting dream of "happy hours bestowed by an electric plug," with "carpet slippers" and "Sunday's roast and Friday's kippers." In such a land even murder can be accommodated by ordinary men and women endowed with the capacity to "transform feelings into soup." Typically, in Grass, the man who wears a Nazi pin on his lapel, or disinfects a gas chamber, or commits one or another mundane treachery, is the victim not of an ideology, but of a conformity that is the true face of ordinariness.

Just so, in the radically different work of Heinrich Böll, the sensible or the "realistic" is often given a bad name by a writer alert to the easy self-deceptions of ordinary persons whose defining features are modesty and adaptability. In Böll, the character who makes "allowances," who operates from a "sense of duty" or "a calm broad-mindedness," is decidedly not to be trusted. Even ordinary language, ostensibly straightforward speech, is suspect. To put one's thoughts into "some useful order," like the narrator in Böll's story "At the Border," is very likely to dissemble, to evade unwanted thoughts. The very word "useful" is pejorative in Böll, as are words such as "theoretical" or "practical."

The major German writers train us to suppose that an ordinary person is a dangerous person, one who misuses or distorts language without knowing quite what he is doing. But there is an important exception. Peter Schneider is as alert as Heinrich Böll or Günter Grass to the limitations of common sense, but he regards the ordinary with nothing like the animus so pervasive in the others. As a political journalist, Schneider has written about a great many subjects with wit and with a wry compassion. He has noted that ordinary people are of course susceptible to meanness and brutality, but he has noted, too, that writers, intellectuals, environmentalists, and professional do-gooders are at least equally susceptible to treachery and self-deception.

East German "citizens" ostensibly committed to the rescue of Vietnamese refugees in the aftermath of the Vietnam war "made no connection," Schneider has observed, between the so-called "heroic struggle of the Vietnamese people" and the actual Vietnamese who lived in their midst. Refugees in the German Democratic Republic found themselves intimidated by ordinary people who spray-painted graffiti on local walls, insulted their customers in shops, and in general displayed no interest whatever in the lives or the needs of their guests; but not-so-ordinary Germans, including persons in very high political and legal positions, have often been guilty of flagrant violations of human rights, as well as a "cynical self-assurance" that makes a mockery of any effort to claim for such persons a superior sensitivity. Though Schneider is typically scrupulous about distinctions and knows better than to equate callow insensitivity with outright brutality, he registers with unfailing candor the tendency of just about everybody to disappoint one's better expectations.



Peter Schneider by Rob Babboni for The New Republic

Schneider has published three books in the last decade. *The German Comedy* appeared in 1991, a volume of essays and vignettes studying "the paradoxes and absurdities of life in the absence of the legendary [Berlin] Wall," introducing us, as Schneider says, "to the West German family man who counted on the Wall to keep his East Berlin mistress a secret or the East German baker dismayed at the loss of work-breaks now that flour is in steady supply." The tone of the book is at once severe and forgiving, rueful and bemused. Serious issues are engaged with an odd combination of earnestness and comic irony. Ostensibly "independent" German minds are ridiculed or teased with much the same satiric brush that is used to paint Stalinist functionaries and new capitalist entrepreneurs.

Selective memory lapses are the order of virtually every day in virtually every precinct of German life, Schneider reports. "The chiefs of dissent march beneath" the same banner that reads, "Whatever you do, just be sure to save face." Though Schneider is drawn to big questions, to questions of "character" and "freedom" and crime and punishment, he beautifully conveys his sense that people will be people—which is to say, less than we might hope and yet unpredictable; interesting if only because they thwart every explanatory theory or idea.

Many factors make for comedy in Schneider's Germany. It often seems that even petty or mundane matters assume, in the German context, absurd dimensions. Consider his observation that in 1990 it was absurd to expect much from "the juridical attempt to overcome the past" in communist East Germany. There, as in post-Hitler Germany, it was almost impossible to find "qualified jurists," and "one can hardly expect those who administered injustice to pass judgment on themselves." It was reasonable, perhaps, to suppose that ordinary goodwill, summoned in circumstances resembling a decent, orderly, democratic system, would sometimes call forth decent instincts even in people tainted by their long complicity with a corrupt and murderous regime; but Schneider argues that it was probably more reasonable to suspect that goodwill would never quite produce—not until a great deal of time had elapsed—comprehensive changes in a society inured to "juridical transgressions." "Detective writers," Schneider writes, "have apparently over-looked the only truly perfect crime: the one in which an entire society is complicit."

The comic element here, as pretty much everywhere in Schneider's work, is a reflection of his abiding conviction that

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moral superiority and "exceptionalism" are difficult to credit when they are underwritten by the idea "that no one has the right to judge somebody else." In a country in which denial is routine, and "sins of omission" have no serious status as sin, indignation will usually seem excessive, and disproportionate to the weight accorded even large failures or indecencies by ordinary persons. Comedy seems better suited to people who have grown adept at deflecting criticism.

No doubt many Germans would bristle—they have bristled—at the suggestion that they are specialists in denial or omission. They can cite—they have cited—instance after instance of soul-searching and hand-wringing, and Schneider often reminds us that German debates about guilt and reparation have sometimes generated morally impressive results. But the Germans, suggests Schneider, are specialists if not in brutality, then at least in varieties of sentimental paranoia. They have a peculiar appetite for what he devastatingly describes as "pleasant high tragedy," so that the fall of the Wall in 1989 inspired in many of them a sense that they were losing something vital to their sense of life's essential savor.

Other Germans, including the many who worked as spies in the East German Stasi, betray the peculiar blend of idealism and "merciless logic" that Schneider finds at once fascinating and appalling. As he reads the testimony of former Stasi functionaries, he is struck by "the degree of personal dedication and faith" inspired by East German Stalinism, so that those who did the dirty work of informing and spying often "did so with little or no selfish interest." In confessing at last to their misdeeds, in apologizing and asking forgiveness of their victims, ordinary Stasi collaborators typically insisted upon the "honesty, truth, uprightness" that they believed they upheld; and it is not at all surprising that when one collaborator heard from another who could not quite bring herself to do all of the terrible things that her colleagues had done, the colleague simply replied, "Well, so I'm a better comrade than you!" This, says Schneider, is an example of a peculiar "idealism," according to which someone can feel morally superior by committing herself wholeheartedly "to carrying out an obviously base act."

And what, in the German context, would be the logical outcome of an "idealism" involving routine betrayals of ordinary norms of decency and the consequent renunciation of those betrayals? Schneider detects in the new Germany a fervent cynicism, a principled dismissal of ideals, a general agreement that "whoever believes in anything is an idiot!" Thus the repentant Stasi collaborator vows never to "act in the name of any idea ever again," with a "heroic" disdain that reminds Schneider of avowals uttered by "the average Nazi after the war." Blind idealism leads, in the new Germany, to "no more ideals," and to a conviction that, if you keep your eye trained on the practical and material, you can avoid any possible temptation to crime.

II.

As a critic and a journalist, Schneider has always sharpened his political reflections with a novelist's instinct for detail and anecdote. But Schneider is also a novelist. *Couplings*, which appeared here in 1996, and now *Eduard's Homecoming*, are lively, attractive, and sobering narratives, extending Schneider's portrait of things German and raising questions about the ability of an essentially comic imagination to deal with ordinary German life. On the evidence of these two novels, it is possible to say that the exigencies of the comic novel have released in Schneider unsuspected strengths. His writing has always been brisk, worldly, instructive, amiable, sharply focused, and irreverent. The fiction adds to these qualities a feeling for character, a gift for paradox and hyperbole, a nose for searching out and skewering every species of political correctness, and a large talent for satire.

Though Schneider is very much a German writer interested in German characters and German situations, he creates figures of genuine if sometimes flawed feeling, and he discovers in them, as in their situations, all that we need in order to feel implicated in their complicated fates. Schneider's fictional characters are not in any ordinary sense ordinary men and women. They risk more, desire more, suffer more, think more. Generally, his male protagonists are intellectuals, creative types, scientists. Their wives, their women, are liberated, eccentric, fiercely independent, exceptionally adept at assuring "the smooth descent and touchdown of [their own] body-ship after its intoxicating [sexual] flight."

Yet these characters do not expend their energies dwelling on how exceptional they are; they do not suppose that they are anything but ordinary human beings afflicted with the standard anxieties and pressures all too familiar to everyone else. And for all of their theories and disquisitions, for all of their passing references to *Don Giovanni* or sado-Marxism or Ernesto Cardenal, they are essentially right about themselves. They are quite as silly and self-absorbed and vulnerable and insufferable as any ordinary person could possibly have a right to be; and in writing about them Schneider is as little inclined to exempt them from common standards of judgment as to pretend that, owing to their intellectual merits, they are somehow less likely than others to say or to do perfectly idiotic things. In Schneider, ordinary is as ordinary does, and there is pleasure to be had in observing the many ways in which people endowed with obvious advantages delude themselves and manage, almost invariably, to make even their more substantial advantages look ambiguous, dangerous, perhaps not quite desirable at all.

In *couplings*, the action revolves around a molecular biologist named Eduard, who keeps a notebook on "the Average Half-life of Love relationships," and conspires with his friends and lovers to do something about the "separation virus" that rages through West Berlin. The novel promises to "look at how the generation that came of age and rebelled in the sixties is coping with love and commitment." The politics of the novel comes through intermittently and in several different guises. An anarchist poet named Theo, who lives in East Berlin "behind" the Wall, provides many opportunities for playful contrasts between East and West, and complains that socialism in the East is a "petit-bourgeois" affair, while the west is nothing more than a "peep-show society." Klara, one of Eduard's "serious" girlfriends, provokes reflections on the war between the sexes and the politics of gender. Everywhere there is a tendency to think fleetingly about the Nazi past and to consider what the mania for "innocence" and clean hands says about Eduard and his friends.

The plot of the novel is a simple mechanism, and rapidly we come to feel that very little is at stake. Eduard's conflicts have mostly to do with women. How committed is he to Klara? What meaning ought these people to ascribe to the casual infidelities that they commit, or to the comparable infidelities committed by their closest friends? Ought one to deny or resist a constant readiness to fall in love, to feel deeply, if only briefly, for several women at once? Is it reasonable that someone who is regularly falling in and out of love should be disturbed by the thought that his own parents were similarly engaged on several fronts, and thereby caused each other pain?

These questions emerge again and again in a novel whose plot mechanisms exist principally to raise them, and to offer some semblance of a reflection on their importance. Characters talk and argue and tease one another with little prospect that anything of consequence will ensue.

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Of course there is always the possibility that a separation will occur, but with separation more or less inevitable in Eduard's world this hardly seems a major consequence. Even characters who fear heartbreak or recrimination quickly recover from their disappointments and move on to new, comparably robust affiliations.

Couplings is a comedy not merely in its playfully orchestrated improbabilities, farcical encounters, and witty observations. It is a comedy in its conviction that, even in a world shadowed by catastrophe and riven by ideological strife, life goes on more or less as it must, and even more or less as it should. People are resilient, however anxious they may seem, however vulnerable to occasional misery or more than occasional doubt. Yes, the novel seems to say, feelings are sometimes hurt—the newspaper reports that a terrorist bomb was exploded in a crowded district, with numerous persons injured, or a dear friend has just learned, again, that he has cancer; but we have learned to expect no less. We ask ourselves why this happens and not that; we discuss ideas with one another and weigh the words that we use; we resolve, yet again, not to be taken in by clichés, by stale versions of an outgrown "bourgeois morality." But we know, more or less, who we are, and we know better than to expect from ourselves a perfect consistency. We find ourselves pathetic, needy, laughable. And we smile at our efforts to forget that we are pathetic, needy, laughable—and, most of all, inconsistent.

As we think of Peter Schneider in all of this, controlling the deft thrusts and parries of a novel that is never less than amusing, one cannot but think of him as a serious man for whom the questions raised in *Couplings* are weighty ones. We do not doubt that for him the novel is something considerably more than a light entertainment. Yet it is hard, all the same, to accord to the affairs of this novel the entirely admiring engagement that we accord to the affairs elaborated in philosophical comedies such as *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* or *Confessions of Zeno*. Those books convey the sense that an essentially comic imagination, alert to every possibility of absurdity, pratfall, and self-delusion, has found itself confronted by matters of life and death, by questions unanswerable though inescapable, by obsessions sometimes trivial or ridiculous but nonetheless compelling and, at bottom, critical to an understanding of the spiritual hungers that animate character. There are hungers in *Couplings*, to be sure; but they are not spiritual, not constitutive of anything essential in Schneider's characters. Nor are the vagrant obsessions of his characters a manifestation of some fertile oddity. Even when his characters confront illness and mortality, there is little sense that the prospect of an imminent death is inescapably related to an abiding concern with the meaning of life. Here there really is a lightness of being.

And yet this failure, if that is what it is, may well express the very heart of Schneider's intention, of his ambition to write a book about things German that did not invest in the lugubrious ultimacies and the morbid infatuations so prevalent in German writing. Perhaps he wished to engage "relevant" issues without suggesting that they are, or need to be, matters of life and death. Is it not possible to create, with no sacrifice of interest or credibility, characters with relatively ordinary problems and manageable obsessions, and to place them in circumstances only vaguely and occasionally associated with the more dire circumstances that are called to mind by words such as "German," "Nazi," "Stasi," or "collaborator"?

Schneider does acknowledge that in the German context thoughts will sometimes turn to dark things. An apparently good man such as Eduard will be moved to speculate about traces of anti-Semitism that he may have picked up. His more radical students at the university will insist that he confront the ethical implications of the animal research that he conducts. Still, if Eduard refuses to be defined by these issues, and if Schneider does not permit his narrative to be overwhelmed by them, this may indicate that Germans of Schneider's generation are free not to be defined by terms and ideas and events that they did not choose for themselves.

Looked at this way, *Couplings* is what may be called a normalizing work. It sets in motion a cast of characters alternately earnest and frivolous, and it subjects them to a scrutiny that makes them at every turn all too human. When they wonder who they are, they expend little energy, enough only to suggest to themselves that they can stand still for a minute before rushing headlong at this or that mostly indifferent object. Their processions are never gloomy, their reflections at best provisional. Always they are caught in the act of making up and moving on. Impressed or provoked by truth-claims associated with one or another idea or faction, they are standard-bearers only for the right to think a little and feel a little and regret a little. What we like best about them is their naturalness. Though we are not quite ready to go along with the student radical who upbraids Eduard with the words "What happened to your rage, your restlessness, your sensitivity?" we have reason to understand what the young man means,

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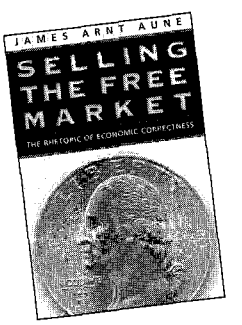

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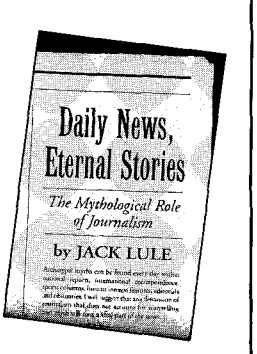

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and we accept that a heavy price has been paid for the normality, even the banality, to which these mostly decent Germans have accommodated themselves.

The comedy in the novel allows for scathing indictment and pointed reflections on power and betrayal, but the dominant accent is light satire and jovial send-up. Guilt is summoned in dream encounters that present transparent caricatures of genuine conflict. Pangs of conscience are calmed or blown away by erotic games. For every complaint of loss there is a compensatory movement forward. Schneider has a gift for the bittersweet and the unquenchable, but he is impatient with loss or grayness, and he is disposed to make light of "existential horror." The new Germany that he evokes in *Couplings* may be a bit of a chaos affording occasional glimpses of a darkling plain and mostly ignorant ideological armies, but he is not much tempted by the prospect of recompense, and his book expresses an essentially sunny and admirably deflationary outlook.

III.

THE SEQUEL TO *Couplings* is, no doubt about it, also a comic novel, though *Eduard's Homecoming* offers a darker portrait of Germany after the fall of the Wall. It is an angrier book than its predecessor, though it has its share of farce and its passages of playful verbal extravagance. The action of the novel is propelled by the return of Eduard to the former East Berlin, after years in California with an American wife and three children. He is lured back to Germany by the prospect of a new job and the news that he has inherited an apartment building. But post-Communist Berlin is a chaotic and disappointing place. Edward's property is occupied by violent squatters determined to prevent him from taking it over, and he finds them only slightly more intimidating and enraging than the lawyers and policemen and journalists whom he meets. Meanwhile his wife is reluctant to resettle in Germany, and her reluctance inspires Edward to think the worst of himself, and to invent ways of winning her back—to himself and to the city.

The novel contains material that will remind readers of Schneider's earlier work. Eduard is clearly the man we remember from *Couplings*, and his friend Theo is, again, the erratic, brilliant, exasperating anarchist poet, though he now lives in what was West Berlin, and is claimed by both the political left and the political right as a "bridge-builder" and a "savior." Schneider remains an equal opportunity satirist, targeting all varieties of political dogmatism, including bridge-building, confessional breast-beating, and the more virulent forms of identity politics. But *Eduard's Homecoming* is an autonomous work, in no way dependent on its predecessor, and it marks for Schneider a considerable advance.

Committed still to a normalizing view of German life, and also to an essentially comic and forgiving perspective, Schneider is here more focused on the intransigent *données* of the universe that he studies, and less inclined to swerve away from unresolvable issues or to let a character dismiss them with a clever line or a good joke. Though the novel refers to an "important rule ... scrupulously adhered to" by some writers, namely, "that any distinction between the important and the trivial was prohibited," *Eduard's Homecoming* is deeply invested in the making of such distinctions. He is by no means a visionary writer, but Schneider intends nothing less than a re-visioning of the recent German past, a project requiring a reconstruction of attitudes so rooted in his countrymen as to seem almost unalterable.

The dominant attitudes to which Schneider's satirical imagination is drawn come in several shapes and dimensions. At the apartment building that Eduard inherits he encounters squatters whose behavior is explosive and unruly, but not altogether clear in its political orientation. These are familiar countercultural leftists in their rhetoric ("Eat the rich!") and in their "socialist" conviction that "buildings belong to their inhabitants." But these same people, defiant about their "rights" and ready at any moment to resort to violence, also paint swastikas on the walls of their buildings and express contempt for foreigners and racial minorities. Apparently sensitive about "the rights of mothers and the unborn," and angry about media control of public opinion, they display no respect whatever for the truth, and are adept at using the media for their own purposes. In the complex of attitudes that they embody, they seem unsavory, despicable, menacing, and not quite forgivable, however impoverished or unfortunate they are. In the end, they are an excrescence of circumstances for which no group or party can be held exclusively responsible. Those circumstances, as Schneider understands them, are the unification of two decidedly "unequal" Germanys and the ideological maneuvers required of all German citizens who wish to lead more or less untroubled lives.

WHAT EDUARD FINDS, after he returns to his homeland, is a world in turmoil, though many of the ideological markers on display are strangely familiar to him from the past. It is not simply that East and West are now no longer separated, or that "capitalists" and "entrepreneurs" from the West are now taking over properties in the East or buying up with plentiful Western dollars all of the scarce, inexpensive merchandise available in the East. It is not simply that, with the opening of Stasi files in the newly "liberated" East, everyone can see that the infamous secret police kept security files on fully half the adult population of the German Democratic Republic, and that a large proportion of the population was at least some of the time employed as informers. Nor is the turmoil that Eduard witnesses merely a reflection of the guilt and the uncertainty experienced by affluent Germans who know not how to deal with their more needy brethren from the East. No, the trouble has much to do with uncertainty about "normal" civilized behavior, and with doubts about a future that may well be, as the poet Theo says, "the root of all evil."

As in earlier books by Schneider, and in the postwar novels of other German writers, the concept of normality itself is subjected to particular scrutiny here. Eduard worries over his right to profit from his inheritance if the building left

Untitled

A light says why. From all the poor prying. Again we attain a more regal posture—small bird accompanying slips between our whim. Where will we flicker, loose as two feathers from a wren's back? Gone, do not brood for all the hands that miss you. They hardly hold. Don't wait, one who thought a dark eye could save you, like night with its black paws curled and gone to sleep. There are only two names to remember, *Loss* and *Pleasure*, crossed in this field like no man's borrowed light. Call the far-sighted foxes to the launching. Call the small deer scattered in the back brush, swift as flit. Contingency has arms and hands and wasted faces. And a body, shrunk and scurvy, built to burn.

Karen Volkman

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to him by a grandfather was improperly extorted from a Jewish owner in the Nazi era, though there are normative conventions in place to suggest that if he was not himself responsible for extortion, and did not contribute to the situation that made it possible, then he owes it to himself and his family to "make the most" of his inheritance without assuming guilt for something beyond his control. Similarly, there are norms and conventions that teach that "freedom of decision didn't exist: human beings were products of their environment and all behaved similarly if subjected to enough pressure." By this standard, as Theo instructs Eduard, Theo's younger brother cannot be condemned for informing on his "subversive" older sibling. After all, "he couldn't compete with me as an enemy of the state; the only role open to him was of custodian and defender of the beliefs I was infringing. His reports on me described the path he might have trodden himself if I hadn't got there first."

Yes, Theo concedes, "you always have a choice between being a bastard and a reasonably decent person," but once you look at the relevant factors, the grounds for a resolute moral condemnation fall away. An enlightened person will avoid "pious fiction" and accept that just about any behavior—including the behavior of "a bastard"—may be normal and in its way acceptable within the framework of an ordinary existence. Eduard is by no means content to go along with Theo on such matters, and Schneider is surely reluctant to credit any such normalizing perspective—but neither is there, in this novel, a fully elaborated theoretical alternative to the ideas formulated by Theo and several other characters.

Resistance emerges fitfully, though powerfully, in brief vignettes, isolated sentences, sharp reversals of a carefully constructed anticipation. Eduard's lovely, volatile, unpredictable wife, Jenny, who bristles with feminist indignation when introduced as "Frau Hoffmann," wife of Eduard Hoffmann, and insists that "whether married or divorced, we're all single mothers," also insists, in all sincerity, "In answer to [Eduard's] question about my sexual fantasies: I don't have any at present, to be honest, nor do I miss them." And with that, Eduard reflects, all the "superior forces" responsible for the presiding and allegedly enlightened assumptions of the age—the feminists, "the sexual gurus and theorists whose talk shows daily revived the dictatorship of the satisfying sex life"—are put to rout.

The issue is not, of course, whether women have sexual fantasies, or ought to have them, or ought to miss them. The issue is whether or not women are free to feel "alright," satisfied, "normal," when and if they do not have the full panoply of appetites that they are told they must have if they are not to consider themselves victims of patriarchal oppression. The struggle for the definition of "normative" behavior extends to just about every aspect of Schneider's novel. Everything is contested, and the spectacle is more or less comic depending upon the quantity of will expended by persons determined to believe that theirs is an "advanced" stance on critical issues.

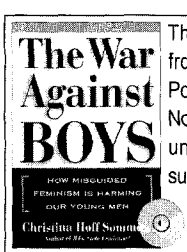
In the old GDR, for example, "official doctrine stated that there could be absolutely no genetic basis for human aggression; acts of violence were held to be symptoms of a misanthropic capitalist environment." At the same time, "since crimes of all kinds were committed in the GDR but could on no account be attributed to environmental factors [in a society that officially proclaimed itself exempt from the usual charges of abuse, corruption, or injustice], the guardians of pure theory were confronted by a painful choice. They had to define acts of violence as relics of capitalist culture or to take a radically biological view and derive them from human nature," with theoretical and political consequences difficult to assess. Schneider's language, here as elsewhere, gives the game away. He invites us, with Eduard, to regard as potentially ridiculous an "official doctrine" based upon recourse to the idiom of "misanthropic capitalist environment," while the "guardians of pure theory" are mocked by the very terms used to identify them.

Here, as elsewhere in Schneider's novel, the comedy lies in the transparently hopeless efforts of ideologically committed parties to make sense of the world without betraying their principles, which amount to a fixed view of the way things must be. Thus Eduard discovers that he is himself inured to a sense of guilt—deserved, he believes, by anyone who is German, sensitive, more or less comfortable, and positioned to profit in ways not generally shared by others. Is this a fixed ideological disposition? Insofar as it operates in Eduard even when he knows better than to take it altogether seriously, and exercises over him a force that is unwarranted by anything reprehensible that he has done, it is unmistakably a fixed disposition. Ideologically it would seem to stem from the belief that, where there is no justice, or nothing that looks like formal justice, one is not permitted to enjoy profit or pleasure.

As expected in a German novel, the normative assumptions and the questions raised to challenge them have often to do with the Nazi past. The questions chiefly ask how far normative assumptions may be said to serve or to obstruct the work of memory and the work of thought. Comedy is not easy to come by in this precinct, though Schneider manages some effective riffs and inspired set pieces. Eduard recalls a lecture that he attended in "the summer before the Wall came down," and reflects that the unspeakably dismal GDR regime "was nowhere more doggedly defended than at the Ivy League universities." Though there are no longer "respectable" academic defenders of the Nazi regime, it is clear that ideology will find ways to support the unspeakable and unsupportable—that even the Nazi past will not for long seem definitively buried, for good and all. Not for nothing does Schneider see to it that the entire novel is required to engage issues bearing on "collective conscience," the "little cowardices" and "despicable acts" of "the generation of Germans" loath "to delve into their parents' or grandparents' antecedents because they risked coming across unpleasant details."

Eduard's wife, Jenny, puts the case for fear and trembling before the past as bluntly and hilariously as anyone could wish—"How did you yourselves turn up in Germany? Like angels who tumbled out of hairless angelic pussies and little pink clouds onto that particular patch of ground? You Germans can't even tell your children who bequeathed them their red hair or talent for music or predisposition to diabetes"—but Eduard and others in this novel never quite put their trepidation behind them. Is it "normal" to persist in such feelings of moral worthlessness, in the suspicion of a taint that one cannot by any action remove, when the deeds inspiring the morbid disposition were performed by others and are a half-century old? Is it the fate of ordinary men and women, persons only ordinarily sensitive and neurotic, so to persist?

There are voices in the novel to suggest that perhaps it is time for Germans to move on. Eduard's lawyer, Klott, warns



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against "premature self-accusations" and admonishes his client that "this isn't a psychotherapy group where your tears would do you credit." But it is Jenny and another woman who most sharply admonish Eduard and, by extension, his generation. They are not to "let things take their course," Jenny says, not to allow "a false version of events [to] prevail." A man, such as Eduard, with but "one eighth of his brain responsible for self-preservation ... still functioning," must not allow himself to be tied to the injustices committed "during the Nazi era." In a society whose intellectuals "vied with each other in pronouncing themselves capable of all manner of misdeeds," and who therefore found themselves committed to a species of "crazy logic," Eduard is susceptible to a "beguiling, infectious apathy."

IT WOULD APPEAR that Schneider, like Jenny and Klott, would like to shake his hero out of his vague compliant guilt. But he does not leave the matter there. Though he resists a programmatic rejoinder to the guilt-tripping and the hypocrisy of a society long inured to the formulaic moral pedantries of leftish propaganda, he does offer a highly suggestive complication. Obsessed with questions about his possibly ill-gotten inheritance, Eduard travels to Palm Beach to interview a onetime acquaintance of his grandfather. There he learns that, wonder of wonders, Egon Hoffmann was a decent man, even a courageous man, who did his best to shield and to assist his Jewish friends, and paid considerably more for the apartment building than its 1930s market value.

The revelation does not change the larger picture, and Schneider makes no claim for a thoroughgoing extenuation. In fact, as Eduard says, his grandfather's story "wouldn't make a suitable apologia for Germans"—indeed, it "magnifies the [actual] guilt of innumerable conformists and accomplices," showing that "it was possible to sabotage the machinery of persecution and destruction," though few attempted to do so. As for Eduard himself, there remains some doubt as to whether he will prove adequate to the responsibility that has devolved upon him with the discovery of the facts of his grandfather's life. "True," his newly acquired Palm Beach confidante says, "you can't claim credit for the courage and decency your grandfather displayed," though there is a "duty to make the best of it," that is, to bear witness to the existence of "the few Germans" who were not complicit in atrocity. "Any German third-grader," she says, "can spell the names of Hitler, Goebbels, and Eichmann, but he's never heard of the Egons.... What sort of examples do you want to imprint on your children's hearts and minds?"

There is a danger, in all this, of a facile sentimentality, a danger to which Schneider's novel never succumbs. In part he owes this success to the patience with which he has Frau Marwitz, the Palm Beach connection, elaborate the financial, legal, political, and personal aspects of the righteous grandfather's stratagems. Not for Schneider, in this book, the ellipses and elisions that he knows well how to practice. The weight and the intricacy of the evidence mobilized on the grandfather's behalf prevent an idle, feel-good mystification. Schneider's object is not to paint an oh-so-poignant picture of a heroic German whose example might redeem the record of a generation. His object is, rather, to suggest how hard it is to retrieve an adequate record of the past, and how complicated are all efforts to construct a valid and marginally satisfactory identity.

The comic strengths of Schneider's novel include its robustly acerbic and sometimes amiable eccentricities, its sharp distaste for cant, and its deliciously nasty way of putting in the mouths of intelligent characters sentiments that often quite fail to do them justice. Though he is not at all averse to eruptions of the broad humor that we associate with farce, the humor of *Eduard's Homecoming* is more often structural or epigrammatically pointed. Schneider has a rare gift for situating action, and for precisely laying out the relevant political and cultural determinants of an individual's thoughts or actions. Small gestures and single phrases are in this way prepared, so that they can seem suddenly hilarious and illuminating without having to be labored or overexplained. Though there is plenty of playfulness and some wit in the dialogue, as in the descriptive prose, the effect is never ornamental or superficial. With his wise, light touch, Peter Schneider appears to have solved the problem that has long plagued German writers. He has found a way to write the comedy of ordinary German life without at all denying that to be German has been, and will continue to be, and might even deserve to be, a special fate. ■

Verse Averse

By ADAM KIRSCH

Talking Dirty to the Gods by Yusef Komunyakaa

(Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 134 pp., $23)

Blue Notes: Essays, Interviews, and Commentaries by Yusef Komunyakaa edited by Radiclani Clytus

(University of Michigan Press, 165 pp., $15.95)

POETRY MAY ASPIRE, like all the arts, to the condition of music; but if it approaches too closely it is likely to pay a price. A poem can be said to be musical in several ways: it can take the form of a lyric to accompany instrumental music; it can create a coherent pattern of sound through meter and rhyme; it can attempt to mimic the overall impression created by a piece of music, usually by straying from denotation into rich connotation. The first kind of verbal music is ancient: the word "lyric" originally meant poetry accompanied by a lyre. The second is still what we usually mean when we praise a poem's music. It is the third type, a product of the nineteenth century and its dream of a unified artwork, that is most problematic, and most easily abused.

In his essay "Swinburne as Poet," Eliot pointed out that this latter kind of poetry is musical only by a rather loose analogy: "an expression of sound, which could not possibly associate itself with music." Actual songs tend to be lucid and simple,

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as in Shakespeare:

> Fear no more the heat o' the sun,
> Nor the furious winter's rages;
> Thou thy worldly task hast done,
> Home art gone, and ta'en thy wages;
> Golden lads and girls all must,
> As chimney-sweepers, come to dust.

The intensification provided by instrumental music actually wars against verbal intensity. It is when poetry, alone, tries to take into itself the emotional or sensuous effects of music that it must stretch its meanings, often to the breaking point. As Eliot says of Swinburne, "there is no pure beauty of sound, or of image, or idea."

And this marks an important point of continuity between the Victorian and modernist periods, for the obscurity of much modernist poetry is really only the radicalization of this type of music. Music's uncanniness lies in its ability to provoke feelings that are at once precise and extremely difficult to name. Hart Crane attempted something similar in "Voyages (II)":

> Take this Sea, whose diapason knells
> On scrolls of silver snowy sentences,
> The sceptred terror of whose sessions
> rends
> As her demeanors motion well or ill,
> All but the pieties of lovers' hands.

This is certainly musical, after a fashion; but the musical impression that it gives has much to do with the attempt to make words, like notes, non-referential. The sea's noise is not like a diapason; an organ cannot write sentences; the sea is not "sceptred"; a scepter does not rend; lovers' pieties are not located in their hands. One has the impression, as often with Crane, that he is allowing himself to be propelled forward by an emotion, hoping that the energy, the strangeness, and the rhythm of his words will impart that emotion, without ever saying what it is or creating an adequate symbol for it. That he succeeds to a remarkable extent cannot be denied. But Crane's verse, like Shelley's or Swinburne's and some of Eliot's—and unlike Donne's, or Wordsworth's, or Frost's—does not wholly survive its effect. It works best if read as it seems to have been written, ecstatically.

YUSEF KOMUNYAKAA IS a musical poet in this tradition. In *Blue Notes*, a collection of his interviews and occasional prose, there is a short statement about Komunyakaa's relationship to jazz music, with the instructive title "Shape and Tonal Equilibrium." He insists, fairly enough, that "As an African American poet ... I resist being conveniently stereotyped as a jazz poet." But jazz is nonetheless a primary inspiration for his technique: "Jazz ... has been the one thing that gives symmetry—shape and tonal equilibrium—to my poetry." It provides a way to unify the eclectic references and "tonal insinuations" that crowd his poems. In other words, what Komunyakaa takes from jazz is improvisation: "I learned from jazz that I could write anything into a poem."

How to provide shape and equilibrium, in the absence of traditional form, is the great challenge for contemporary poetry. The binding power that Komunyakaa finds in jazz is what all free-verse poets seek. "Tone," he writes in another short essay, "is the poem's buried structure. Here I think of Charlie Parker as he played 'Cherokee,' incorporating surprised feelings into the composition." But the jazz metaphor leads to a particular, and perilous, interpretation of what it means to improvise in language. For, in the most basic sense, all writing of poetry is partly improvisation; there is no complete certainty as to what the next word, the next image, will be. The real choice is whether to make the improvised words seem composed, to give them the appearance of inevitability; or else to make the poem read as if it were improvised. (This choice is parallel to the choice between formal verse and free verse.) Komunyakaa opts for the latter—not just for the fact of improvisation, but also for the appearance of improvisation; and what it gives in range and energy it takes away in precision and control.

A GOOD EXAMPLE is the poem "1984," from *I Apologize for the Eyes in My Head*, which appeared in 1986. (Komunyakaa's first seven books are excerpted in *Neon Vernacular*, which was published in 1993.) The title sets the theme for Komunyakaa's variations—Orwell's dystopia—and he allows a series of associated words and images to swarm together:

> We say, "I've seen it all."
> Bombardment & psychic flux,
> not just art nouveau tabula rasa
> or double helix. We're ancient mariners
> counting wishbones, in supersonic hulls
> humming a falconer's ditty
> over a banged-up job.

The passage can be called jazz-like, if by that we mean a frenetic and wandering attention, but it has nothing intrinsically to do with jazz. (In its fractured narrative it is reminiscent of John Ashbery, a poet who has no proclaimed affinity with jazz.) It proceeds by non sequitur, a weakening of syntactic and semantic logic, and it suggests the same kinds of questions that we ask of Crane. If "art nouveau" and "double helix" are things that we have seen, and grown jaded about, why is "tabula rasa" included in the list, since it is not parallel to the other two? Why are we "counting" wishbones, rather than wishing on them or pulling them apart? "Hulls" and "mariners" suggest a seagoing ship, but there are no "supersonic" ships: that word implies an airplane. And why does the sound of the "hull" resemble a "falconer's ditty"? What does it mean to hum a ditty "over" a "banged-up job"? And what is that job?

Of course, we are not supposed to ask these questions. The passage speeds past them, leaving not a meaning but an impression. Even when the meaning is clearer, there are always particular words and transitions that seem born less of design than of whim. Consider "Diorama," a section of the sequence "Palimpsest," from Komunyakaa's 1998 volume *Thieves of Paradise*:

> Terra incognita—crosshairs
> & lines on the atlas—anywhere
> have-nots outnumber raintrees along
> avenues
> igniting skylines, marrying the dead
>
> to the unborn. The meek. The brain
> an Orwellian timemachine where *Boyz*
> *N the Hood* drifts into a Fagin school.
> They look for Wild Maggie Carson,
>
> Crazy Butch, the Little Dead Rabbits,
> Plus Uglies, & Daylight Boys. No one
> escapes the concentric shotgun blast.
> Circles reach back to Hell's Kitchen
>
> & out to Dorchester, coldcocking
> the precious sham of neon. The night
> sways like a pinball machine on a warped
> floor
> slowdragged smooth by Love & Hate
> in each other's arms.

Here the "buried structure" is not clearly announced, but it can be teased out: the poem is a set of improvisations on the subject of urban poverty and gang violence. Komunyakaa suggests a continuity between the urchins of *Oliver Twist* ("Fagin school"), nineteenth-century New York gangs such as the Plug Uglies, and the contemporary African American gangs portrayed in the film *Boyz N the Hood*. These zones of poverty are, to most people, "terra incognita," inhabited by nameless "have-nots." The "shotgun blast," the effect of violence, reaches everyone in the old New York ghetto of Hell's Kitchen, the modern Boston ghetto of Dorchester, and, by implication, the similar neighborhoods in every American city. But there are wide

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gaps in this net of inference. How does an avenue ignite a skyline? Why are there "raintrees" in these urban landscapes? Who are the "they" that "look for" the people named (and who are most of the people)? How do you "coldcock" a "sham"?

Interestingly, Komunyakaa's "jazz" style—if it is fair so to call it—recedes before certain subjects, which demand a more straightforward treatment. One of these, oddly enough, is jazz itself, and the lives of its heroes. The section of *Thieves of Paradise* called "Testimony" is a sequence of fourteen poems about Charlie Parker, and the desire to testify accurately leads Komunyakaa to a plain, prosy style:

> I can see him, a small boy
> clutching a hairbrush.
> This is 852 Freeman
> Street, just after his father
> took off on the Pullman line
> with a porter's jacket
> flapping like a white flag.

Here, more clearly than in Komunyakaa's wilder poems, we can see that his free verse, like most free verse, is basically made up of prose sentences, arbitrarily lineated. In one of the interviews included in *Blue Notes*, Komunyakaa says that "when I first write a poem, I will confine it to its initial line breaks, but when I'm reading [aloud], I read basically according to how I'm feeling.... When I'm reading, I'm not always looking at the page, but I remember the words." This seems fairly clear evidence that the "initial line breaks" are not created with any sonic pattern in mind, but with that same inchoate drive towards "equilibrium" that informs every aspect of his poems. And as with almost every free-verse poet, the pressure of those line breaks is not strong enough to direct our reading of the verse.

JAZZ, TOO, INVITES a certain sentimentality from Komunyakaa. The next to last poem in *Neon Vernacular* is "Blue Light Lounge Sutra for the Performance Poets at Harold Park Hotel," and it is a case study in what happens when poetry reaches for the pre-verbal power of music:

> the need gotta be
> so deep words can't
> answer simple questions
> all night long notes
> stumble off the tongue
> & color the air indigo
> so deep fragments of gut
> & flesh cling to the song....

This is a poem about the insufficiency of poetry, of language: a time-honored theme, but always a problematic one. If the need addressed by poetry is "so deep words can't answer" it, what can the poet do but gesture at it, declaring his own limitations? Komunyakaa is driven to synesthesia—indigo notes, gut clinging to the song—to indicate a fulfillment that is natural to music but extremely difficult to achieve in poetry.

The other subject that calls forth a plain style from Komunyakaa is the Vietnam war. He is perhaps best known as a "Vietnam poet," thanks mainly to the poems in *Toys in a Field* (1986) and *Dien Cai Dau* (1988). This tortured subject has seldom been handled in a truly poetic fashion—that is, disinterestedly and aesthetically. Perhaps enough time has not yet elapsed. Komunyakaa's poems are, instead, forms of witness, autobiographical and morally insistent. It is an honorable purpose, and one that he fulfills with candor.

We learn from *Blue Notes* that Komunyakaa was a military reporter in Vietnam, frequently saw combat, and was awarded a Bronze Star. As a journalist, he was already burdened with the task his poetry was to address more completely: "I had to report, I had to witness." And that is what he does, for example, in "Please":

> Mistakes piled up men like clouds
> pushed to the far side.
> Sometimes I try to retrace
> them, running
> my fingers down the map
> telling less than a woman's body—
> we followed the grid coordinates
> in some battalion commander's mind.
> If I could make my mouth
> unsay those orders,
> I'd holler: Don't
> move a muscle.
> Stay put,
> & keep your fucking head
> down, soldier.

These poems, for all their awful subject matter, are unsurprising; the writing of the world wars, and other Vietnam writing, has taught us what to expect. The merit of Komunyakaa's Vietnam poems lies in their precision, like this fine description of a captured Vietnamese soldier "surrendering halfway: the small man inside / waits like a photo in a shirt pocket, refusing / to raise his hands." Komunyakaa is also striking in his descriptions of what it was like to be a black soldier in the American army, divided from both fellow soldier and enemy. "Hanoi Hannah," a poem about listening to the North Vietnamese radio propagandist, is restrained but telling:

> Howitzers buck like a herd
> of horses behind concertina.
> "You know you're dead men,
> don't you? You're dead
> as King today in Memphis.
> Boys, you're surrounded by
> General Tran Do's division."

What Komunyakaa calls, in that same interview, the "vicious arguments with oneself" that he underwent in Vietnam are only alluded to in his verse, but their violence is well communicated by his reticence.

TALKING DIRTY TO THE GODS is Komunyakaa's tenth book, and it is a departure from his previous work. It contains 132 poems, all in the same form, a loose semi-sonnet of four quatrains. It is the first time that he has so comprehensively submitted to a regular form, though it is not a very constricting one: there are no rhymes, the line lengths vary, and the basic structure of the poems remains that of the sentence. Still, the form provides a measure of tension that has been missing from much of his earlier work. Even such flexible limitations have led Komunyakaa to produce his best poems so far.

The nearest analogy to *Talking Dirty to the Gods* is Robert Lowell's *History*, another collection of irregular sonnets. Like Lowell, Komunyakaa meditates brokenly on violence, natural and human; esoteric details from his reading provide many of his subjects and images. The poems do not tell a single story, but the repetition of form and the return to a few subjects and fields of reference make the book feel unified. Komunyakaa looks to Greek antiquity, to nature, and to contemporary America for his subjects, and he mixes the three to good effect.

"Eros," for instance, sounds one of the collection's main themes, the power of sex:

> He's on a hammock in Bangkok,
> Eating succulent prawns & squid
> Spiced with red pepper & lemongrass.
> Hesiod's "Fairest of the deathless
> Gods" can feel the fatigue syndrome
> Loosen its grip in this archipelago
> Of pleasures. He reads a pirated
> Edition of *The Plague*. At twilight,
> He'll go to the corner shop
> & buy a jade brooch for Muriel
> Back in Boise. He'll return
> To Club Limbo. A new counterfeit
> Gift dipped in fire. Eros throws
> A kiss to the teenage prostitute,
> & touches the wad of greenbacks
> Nestled against his groin.

The irony here—Eros is not a graceful boy, but a jaded American sex tourist—is rather heavy, especially the stereotypical "Muriel back in Boise," a Babbitt wife. Yet the particulars in the poem, the juxtaposi-

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tion of registers—the gross "wad of greenbacks" delicately "nestled" against the groin—is very effective. And in this limited compass, Komunyakaa's usual obscurities—who or what is the "counterfeit gift dipped in fire"?—seem better calibrated, more jarring, than when they come in a continuous stream.

Another poem, "October," is equally striking in its respect for archaic violence:

> Half of summer, at the lonely
> Wooded edge you lingered.
> Now, with that wet nose
> Pressed to the windowpane,
> I fear for you. In changing
> Coat, your antlers a crime.
> I say *Arrow & rifle slug,*
> But you keep edging closer.
> I wish you understood salt licks
> & blinds. If you were in northern
> Mexico, not in New Jersey
> Where the leaves fake blood,
> Praise would be a Tarahumara
> Chasing you till a heart detonates
> Shadows, till Actaeon's voice is
> Surrounded by his baying hounds.

The sudden introduction of Actaeon is a much more unlikely and pleasing use for Greek myth than most contemporary poets can find. Komunyakaa's wary respect for the hunter, his pity for the elk in domesticated New Jersey, are in keeping with the book's general distrust of modern life, which has not eliminated violence, but casts it in new and less honest forms. Modernity is derided as an "endless situation comedy," as mere "modern reason."

KOMUNYAKAA IS NOSTALGIC for a world before Darwin, when "what the worm/Taught us was sacred,/Serene as the beetle/Grub the bird now jabs/With her spear"—for the insect world that he conjures in "Bedazzled":

> A jeweled wasp stuns
> A cockroach & plants an egg
> Inside. In no time, easy
> As fear eats into someone,
>
> The translucent larva grows
> Beneath its host's burnished
> Shell. The premature stinger
> Waits like a bad idea, almost
> Hidden.

Instead we now have the far more destructive and vulgar violence of man. One modern specimen is exhibited in the book's first poem, "Hearsay":

> Yes, they say if you shave a monkey
> You'll find a pragmatist, the president
> Of a munitions plant, a tobacco tycoon,
> Or a manufacturer of silicone breasts
> Who owns a medieval chateau
> Decorated with Picasso's *Weeping Women*
> & Madonna's underwear.

One advantage of the sonnet sequence—and *Talking Dirty to the Gods* is more or less a sonnet sequence—is that not every poem needs to succeed equally. The momentum of repetition carries us over the limper or more confusing poems. The latter occur when Komunyakaa attempts too many disjunctions in the short space that he has to work with, as in "The God of Broken Things":

> He could go on forever fixing
> Cracks, fissures, dents, fractures,
> Rasping & gluing together what is
> Unheard-of with what can never be
> Broken or hurt beneath the architecture
> Of planned obsolescence. Objets d'art
> & bric-a-brac mended with ratty hemp.
> The secret space the butterfly
> Screw opens wings inside a heart
> Made to slip into a dream.

The leap from the rather banal list of synonyms to the elevated, wandering, syntactically wounded lines is unsatisfying. And the last sentence is more or less unreadable—a screw opens a space that wings inside a heart that slips into a dream—all dreamy connotation, no precise denotation. It is an example of the kind of improvised, "musical" verse that Komunyakaa has often written in the past, and its weakness is the more evident in this more regular form.

Indeed, this is a good example of the virtue of form: it urges a certain objectivity and openness, it prevents the poet from improvising and demands that he compose. If the form in *Talking Dirty to the Gods* were stricter, Komunyakaa could perhaps get away with more obscurity, since the pattern would enforce a sense beyond the literal sense. That is what Lowell often achieves in the sonnets in *History*, such as "Bird?":

> A large pileated bird flies up,
> dropping excretions like a frightened
> snake
> in Easter feathers; its earwax-yellow
> spoonbill
> angrily hitting the air from side to side
> blazing a passage through the smothering
> jungle—
> the lizard tyrants were killed to a man
> by this bird,
> man's forerunner. I picked up stones,
> and hoped
> to snatch its crest, the crown, at last,
> and cross
> the perilous passage, sound in mind
> and body...
> often reaching the passage, seeing my
> thoughts
> stream on the water, as if I were cleaning
> fish.

With Lowell's poem, too, we can ask many questions about sense: what, for example, is the "perilous passage"? And yet the heavy, perfectly tuned lines, each accelerating into its end-stop, create a verbal music that carries all before it. Komunyakaa, by contrast, still takes his direction from prose, not from verse, and so he does not make the most of his chosen form. But even with this limitation, *Talking Dirty to the Gods* is his best and most beautiful book so far. ■

CORRESPONDENCE

continued from page 5

available, U.S. growers of sugar beets have not used them.

RICHARD O. KEELOR, PH.D.
President and CEO
The Sugar Association
Washington, D.C.

Missing a beat

TO THE EDITORS:

Leon Wieseltier's "Carvin' the Bird" glosses over the hard questions about Ken Burns's series "Jazz" (January 22). Among the major points that Wieseltier ignored:

The ideological purity of Jazz at Lincoln Center, headed by talking head (and senior creative consultant) Wynton Marsalis, is real and influential. To the naïve observer, all the talk about "democracy" is a convenient smoke screen. Marsalis appoints his orchestra based on personal preference, not auditions. And he continues to ignore major advances in modern jazz. It is absurd to bypass the seminal music of pianist Cecil Taylor, saxophonist Albert Ayler, or saxophonist Anthony Braxton and still call your series "Jazz."

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The editors welcome correspondence from readers. Please address letters to Correspondence, TNR, 1220 19th Street NW, Washington, D.C. 20036 (letters may also be sent electronically to tnr@aol.com). All letters should include the writer's full name, address, and telephone number; be typed double-spaced; and be fewer than 200 words. Letters may be edited for space and clarity. Please do not send letters via fax.

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WASHINGTON DIARIST

Save It

"HOW DO YOU DESCRIBE both a beginning and an end?" muses telejournalist Buck Williams (a.k.a. Kirk "Growing Pains" Cameron) in the new evangelical thriller *Left Behind*, which made its nationwide theatrical debut on Groundhog Day. Sadly for Mr. Cameron's career, a beginning-to-end description of his latest project is all too easy: schlock. From Buck's hokey, pseudo-mystical opening query to the hokey, pseudo-mystical closing shot of glowing church windows, this 95-minute exploration of the disappearance of millions of people (it's the Rapture, stupid) is filmmaking at its tritest. Bad script, bad acting, monumentally bad sound track, bad movie.

BASED ON A BEST-SELLING NOVEL BY Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Left Behind* is premised on a painfully stale tenet of modern apocalyptic paranoia: The United Nations is the root of all evil. For a while, it looks as though the film, in a burst of originality, will paint the U.N. not as intrinsically wicked but as the hapless pawn of greedy international bankers. But, sure enough, in a last-minute twist we discover that (gasp!) the bankers are actually the pawns of the new U.N. secretary-general, who turns out to be (gasp!!) the Antichrist. To most of my Washington colleagues, this sort of apocalyptic fundamentalism seems like a fringe phenomenon—David Koresh with a movie camera and a cast of c-list actors. It's not. Six of the books in LaHaye and Jenkins's apocalyptic series have hit the *New York Times* best-seller list. *Left Behind* alone has sold more than 17 million copies. The film's producers, meanwhile, recruited some 3,000 "sponsors"—mostly churches—to help bankroll distribution.

LEFT BEHIND DIDN'T STRIKE ME AS culturally marginal at all; rather, it offered a hideous, 95-minute flashback to a childhood spent in the bosom of the Southern Baptist church. The congregations of my youth were the sort that still dominate much of the Bible Belt today—intently focused on the need to "accept Jesus Christ as your personal lord and savior" and then lead others to do the same. No one spoke in tongues or saw visions of demons; it was all excruciatingly suburban and mainstream. Even so, from day one I was bombarded with cautionary tales of the flames of hell and, in a more apocalyptic vein, of terrified young folk whose families dematerialized without warning. Sunday school, Bible school, revivals, retreats—all were geared to impress upon us the miracle of salvation and the eternal agony awaiting those who refused to believe.

SOMETHING ELSE RECENTLY BROUGHT to mind the old bromides about redemption and grace: George W. Bush's hot new initiative to enlist "faith-based" groups in the battle against social ills such as crime, drug abuse, and teen pregnancy. Now, I realize that such funding doesn't inevitably violate the separation of church and state. And my Yankee friends assure me that places like Covenant House in New York and parochial schools all over provide secular services without forcing their views into anyone's soul. Which is fine—except that New York is not Greenville, and Catholicism (or Judaism or Unitarianism) is not an evangelical faith.

IN THEIR MINDS, THE PARISHIONERS of my childhood were simply working to bring hope to lost souls—just as *Left Behind* is being pitched as an uplifting film. "It's a way to spread hope in a very non-threatening way," one pastor told *The Washington Post*. But it's a peculiar brand of hope. *Left Behind* tells viewers nothing about what it means to be a Christian—other than that you'll never wake up to find your loved ones missing and Satan's henchman ruling the planet. The movie is filled with people shrieking, weeping, and bleeding. The military declares martial law. Folks are gunned down and blown up. And in the closing lines—after Buck has accidentally helped bring the Antichrist to power—we are warned that the coming seven years will be the most horrifying in human history. "Our only hope," intones Cameron, "is to join together and trust God. I don't have all the answers, but, for now, faith is enough."

THIS IS NOT A MESSAGE OF HOPE. IT IS a message of fear. Let Christ into your heart—or else! And don't ask too many questions. It is precisely the kind of "scared straight," hellfire-and-brimstone indoctrination that gave me a stomachache from the time I was old enough to grasp the concept of damnation to the moment that . . . well, to tell the truth, it still gives me a stomachache. Still, I cannot deny that the message works: Throughout my youth, such tales of "hope" invariably sent hordes of traumatized teens streaming down the aisle to "get saved"—some for the second or third time. I was right there with them. Never entirely secure in my salvation, I formally answered the call to Christ at least twice—first, at the tender age of ten; again, a few years later at a particularly tear-soaked youth retreat. I was even among a handful of girls who, during one summer revival, badgered a friend whose family was of another (albeit Christian) faith to get saved that very night at our church—despite the trouble it was sure to stir up with her devout parents. Our intentions—like our hearts—were pure.

"IT WORKS," OF COURSE, IS ALSO THE argument being used to push Bush's faith-based initiative. And far be it from me to question the transformative power of religion. Bush himself credits Jesus with having changed him from a drunk dilettante into president of the United States. Now he wants every troubled soul to have the same opportunity for redemption and, to that end, plans to offer federal dollars to religious groups that perform social services. Don't worry, W. promises, there won't be any proselytizing. But, for a born-again evangelical, Bush's promise suggests a deep misunderstanding of many denominations within his chosen faith (particularly those across his beloved South). In the churches of my youth, and in the thousands that sponsored *Left Behind*, the idea of not spreading the good word runs absolutely counter to God's directive. The underlying goal, no matter how gentle and indirect, will remain, as one minister recently acknowledged to the *Post*, to help lost souls see the light.

BUSH ASSURES US THAT SECULAR alternatives will still be available (though they will have to compete with religious groups for funding). And in areas where religious pluralism thrives, choices among providers of different faiths will presumably thrive as well—which could be great news for the poor and downtrodden in Chicago or Boston or Minneapolis. But what about the poor and downtrodden in places where religious pluralism effectively means a choice between Southern Baptist and the Church of the Nazarene? In Bush's Texas, all faiths were invited to get on board the charitable-choice train—and, to no one's surprise, Christians overwhelmingly dominated the field.

OF COURSE, IT MAY BE THAT THE LAST hope for drug addicts and welfare moms is to be scared straight into the arms of Christ. Clearly, this approach has done wonders for our new president. Just trust in Jesus. Don't ask too many questions. And no one has to get left behind.

MICHELLE COTTLE

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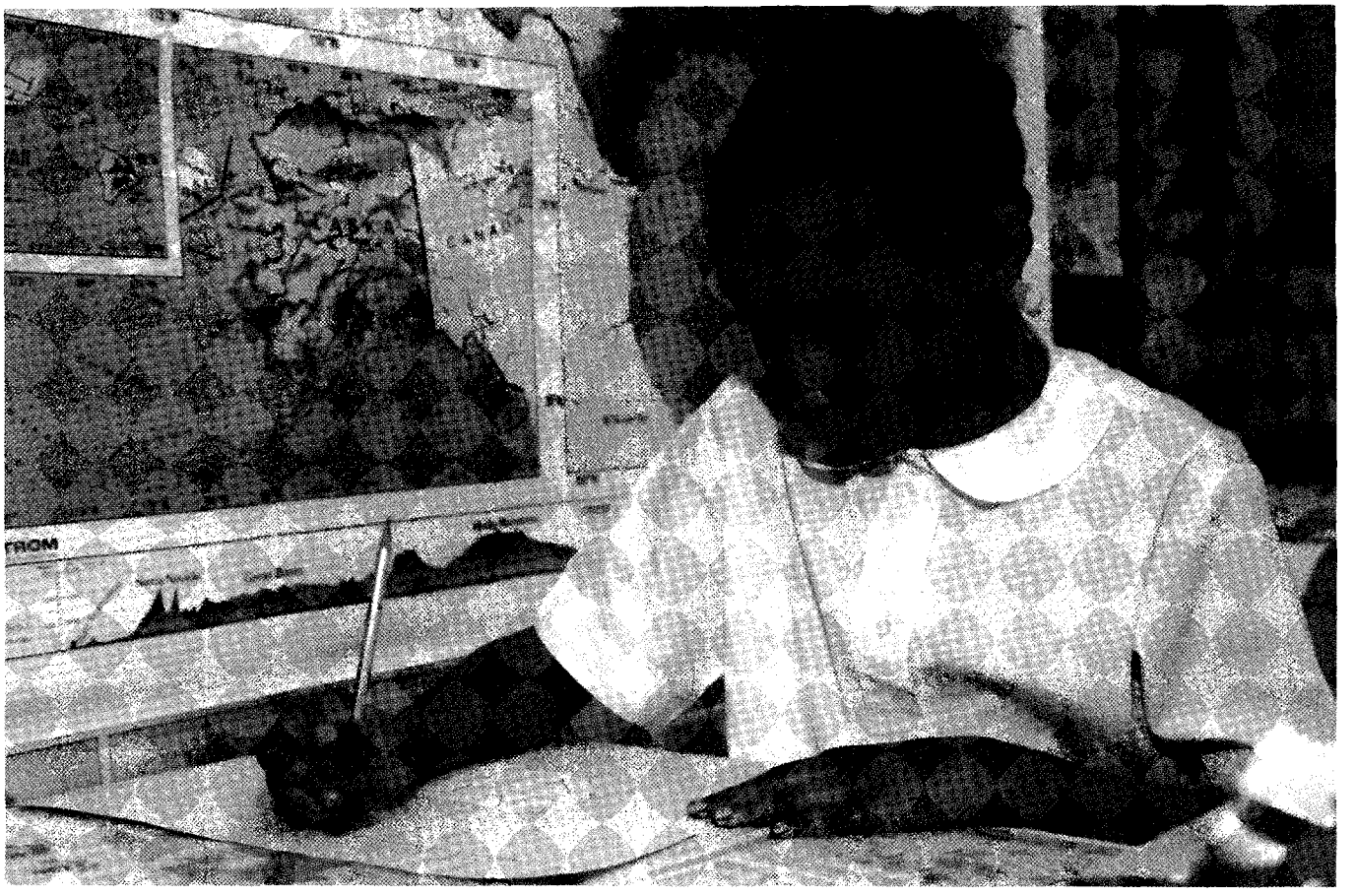

Private School Choice Sparks Public School Improvement

By Ken Johnson
Vice President, Milwaukee Public Schools Board of Directors
Member, IBEW Local 494, AFL-CIO

As vice president of a large urban school board, here's a message for parents of every public school child in America:

Private school choice is one of the best things that ever happened to my city's public schools.

Many are surprised to hear that from an elected member of the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) Board of Directors. They are even more surprised to learn that several of my board colleagues agree that school choice is strengthening our public schools.

Parental school choice is widespread — unless you're poor.

Milwaukee's experience with school choice flatly contradicts the claims of its opponents, who misled citizens to think that private school choice harms children "left behind" in public schools. The exact opposite is true in Milwaukee, where we have the nation's oldest and largest program of tax-supported vouchers for low-income parents.

School choice fundamentally has changed Milwaukee's public education mindset. Before Milwaukee's parental choice plan, some in MPS seemed to have the view that 'we own the children of Milwaukee.' Low-income families in Milwaukee had no other choice than MPS. But when Wisconsin's Supreme Court upheld the school choice program, and participation quadrupled, MPS realized it would have to improve.

The good news is — it has. MPS has expanded all-day 4-year-old kindergarten, Montessori programs, and K-8 schools. School administrators and local governance councils have more autonomy to hire teachers and make budget decisions.

What about results? A new MPS Accountability Report says our dropout rate declined for the fourth in a row. Suspensions also are down. A *USA Today* report cited substantial improvement of fourth grade MPS students in all tested subjects over the past four years.

As the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* editorialized: "Much of what [MPS] is doing to improve gained impetus because of the expansion of choice in Milwaukee."

The idea that public schools need to improve has been around a long time. But, without school choice and charters, we wouldn't be seeing anything like the improvements that are taking place in Milwaukee's public schools.

baeo
Black Alliance for Educational Options

For more information go to: www.schoolchoiceinfo.org

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